Formal performance appraisal interviews: Can they really be objective, and are they useful anyway?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a qualitative field study conducted in Australia which examined what is occurring in formal performance appraisal interviews in relation to their objectivity and resultant outcomes. Supervisors and subordinates who had recently been involved in performance appraisals were interviewed about their experiences of the process. Perceptions of the utility of, and satisfaction with the interview process were examined. Further, the effect of the relationship between the participants on objectivity was investigated. Results indicated that formal appraisal interviews were not perceived to be of great utility, and that the relationship of the participants impacted on the interview.
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This paper reports on a qualitative field study investigating the use of performance appraisal interviews. The research was intended to provide information in relation to the benefits of formal appraisal interviews, potential problems with the systems, and guidelines for their use in practice.

Previous research in the area of performance appraisal has largely been based in the laboratory, or has used a vignette methodology, relying on people to report on what they would do. More recent research has investigated specific aspects of the review process, such as participation in the process (see Cawley, Keeping and Levy, 1998, for a meta-analysis) and procedural justice (Taylor, Masterson, Renard, & Tracy, 1998). Field research which has looked at subordinates’ evaluation of the overall process of performance appraisal, however, has almost been non-existent. In particular, there is an abundance of literature in both academic and practitioner oriented publications which prescribe how performance appraisal interviews should be carried out (see Latham, Skarliki, Irvine, & Siegel, 1993, for review). Clearly, a need exists to examine participants’ views of the process and usefulness of performance appraisal interviews.

We examined perceptions of interactants’ beliefs about the usefulness of the performance appraisal interview. There are many proponents of the benefits of the performance appraisal (see for example, Glen, 1990; Latham & Wexley, 1994). Nevertheless, there are some dissenters. Carson, Cardy, and Dobbins (1991), for example, have proposed that performance appraisal is not useful because subordinates
have much less control over their own performance than the advocates of performance appraisal assume. Halachmi (1993) also expressed concern about the usefulness of performance appraisal. He argues that performance appraisal methods currently in use are expensive, have limited value, and may even at times be dysfunctional. The alternative he advocates is performance targeting, where the partnership between the supervisor and subordinate is important.

In the present study, we look specifically at supervisor and subordinate perceptions of performance appraisal, and the relationship between them. In the following, we briefly review some of the field experiments that have examined these aspects of the performance appraisal. In particular, some researchers have examined subordinates’ perceptions of performance appraisals. Kleiman, Biderman, and Faley (1987) looked at the perceptions that subordinates had of a subjective appraisal system. Results indicated that subordinates’ perceptions of fairness and accuracy increased as both rater qualifications increased, and the discussion of appraisal outcomes (such as salary increases) was emphasised in the interview. That is, when the rater had higher qualifications, and had discussed outcomes in the interview, the subordinate perceived greater accuracy and fairness.

Ilgen, Petersen, Martin, and Boeschen (1981) examined sixty supervisor-subordinate dyads before and after annual appraisals. Subordinates’ perceptions of the appraisal session were investigated. Results indicated that subordinate perceptions of supervisor trustworthiness were related to both the atmosphere and helpfulness of the session. Further, more highly educated people were less satisfied. (Supervisor and subordinate satisfaction will be examined in the current research.)
Previous research has also examined the influence of the relationship between supervisors and subordinates in the workplace. Pulakos and Wexley (1983) examined perceptual similarity in performance appraisals. One hundred and seventy-one supervisor-subordinate dyads from a range of industries, with approximately equal numbers of male-male, male-female, female-female, and female-male dyads participated. Questionnaires were administered to both supervisors and subordinates, and the results showed that higher performance evaluations were given to subordinates in dyads where there was mutual perceptual similarity.

Tsui and O’Reilly (1989) found similar results with 272 dyads in the workplace who once again completed questionnaires. Lower effectiveness ratings were given to subordinates who were dissimilar on relational demographics (age, gender, race, education, and company and job tenure). Supervisors also reported less personal attraction for dissimilar employees.

Finally, Nathan, Mohrman, and Milliman (1991) investigated the impact of the interpersonal relationship on performance and satisfaction. Supervisor-subordinate dyads in the field were questioned regarding their relationship before an appraisal interview, then measures were taken of performance and satisfaction after the appraisal. It was found that the relationship was related to the interview content.

In summary, these studies indicate that subordinate perceptions of trustworthiness, accuracy and fairness are all related to the interview process. Further, the relationship between the participants in the appraisal interview has been shown to influence the process, content, and outcomes of the appraisal interview. The aim of our study was to investigate these effects in the Australian context.
Research Questions

Formal hypotheses will not be presented for this study, where the objective was to learn and to explore, rather that to test hypotheses rigorously (Parkhe, 1993). There were two purposes to this research. The first was to examine the assumption that performance appraisal interviews are conducted objectively. In particular, the influence of the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate was examined. The second objective was to investigate participants’ perceptions of the benefits of formal performance appraisal interviews, particularly in terms of satisfaction and usefulness. This objective was especially important because performance appraisal interviews are widely conducted in Australia, (Morehead, Steele, Alexander, Stephen, & Duffin, 1997) and are based on an assumption that the benefits from this process outweigh the time, money and effort put in.

METHOD

Qualitative Research

Historically, the dominant paradigm in the field of social science has been positivistic, and based on assumptions of objectivity (Marshall, 1986). As such, research has been designed, analysed, and discussed in the context of quantitative statistical analysis. Qualitative research is an alternative to the quantitative approach, and is more likely to provide a large amount of rich information which is in great depth, but is obtained from a smaller number of people (Walker, 1985). In particular, qualitative research includes attributes that make it an appealing alternative to quantitative research. Patton (1990) presents numerous themes which are present in

Qualitative research. Some of these are advantages that have direct relevance to the present study. One is that the inquiry is naturalistic. This means that the researcher can study what is actually happening without manipulating or controlling the research process. Furthermore, qualitative research allows for a holistic perspective, so that the whole phenomenon under study can be understood as more than just the sum of its parts. A final advantage is that qualitative research can focus attention on processes that occur in practice.

Data obtained from the present research comprise answers to interview questions. The results will therefore be presented in terms of what people have actually said. Quotes will be presented to illustrate certain points.

**Interviewing as a Qualitative Research Technique**

Interviewing participants is one of the main techniques utilised by qualitative researchers (Strauss, 1987). In particular, the semi-structured, face-to-face interview is a conversation with a specific purpose (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). As such, this type of interview is useful for gaining certain types of information, but not all. Berg (1989) states that one area where interviews are useful is when the investigators are interested in perceptions of participants. The semi-structured interview is especially suitable because it allows the interviewer to control the general direction of the interview, but encourages the respondent to talk freely about whatever seems important to them.

**Pilot Study**

The interviews were piloted on two supervisors (one male and one female) and two subordinates (one male and one female). The interviews were conducted by the
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first author, who prepared the interview schedule, and interviewed four participants who had recently been involved in a performance appraisal interview. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and the fact that it was a pilot study. The tape recorder was then turned on, and the interview recorded.

Following the interview, the participants were asked to provide feedback to the researcher Changes to question wording were made to questions that were unclear, or failed to elicit a useable response.

**Main study Participants**

Twenty subordinates and ten supervisors who had been involved in a performance appraisal interview in the previous three months took part in the main study. There were ten male subordinates and ten female subordinates. The subordinates had been in the organisational position in which they were reviewed for an average of three years and two months (range seven months to five years). The supervisors (five male and five female) had been in their positions for between six months and eight years (mean = four years). The supervision relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate had existed for two years on average (range from six months to five years).

The participants came from a range of Australian organisations, including the Australian Public Service, Queensland Public Service, quasi-government organisations and large private organisations in a variety of industries, all located in Brisbane, Australia. All organisations had at least 200 organisational members. Each supervisor had participated in an interview with two of the subordinates. Two subordinates were chosen for each supervisor to allow comparisons to be made by the
Interview Procedure

Each participant was contacted by telephone to arrange an interview time. The first author interviewed each person individually at his or her place of work. These interviews were audiotaped with the participant’s permission. The interviews were conducted in a private room with only the participant and the interviewer present. Each participant was informed of the general purpose of the research, that the audiotape would only ever be heard by the researcher, and that on the tape they were only identified by a code number. It was further stressed to the participants that the other interactant in their performance appraisal interview would not be given any indication about what was said to the researcher. Next, the participant was informed that no individuals or organisations would be identified in any reporting of the research. The participant was then told that s/he would be given more information after the interview, but was given the opportunity to ask any questions or express any concerns. Following this, the tape recorder was turned on.

A semi-structured interview format was utilised, which incorporated specific questions asked of each participant. In keeping with the purpose of semi-structured interviewing, however, and to ensure that rapport developed and was not broken, the interviewer allowed the participant to lead the conversation to a certain extent. The
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The interviewer ensured, nonetheless, that all questions were asked of all the participants, although not necessarily in the same order. Furthermore, participants were not discouraged from introducing information into the conversation. The interviewer also tried to maintain the flow of the conversation. A slightly different interview schedule was used for the supervisors and the subordinates, because the supervisors were responding in relation to two subordinates. Both open-ended (eg. How useful was this feedback?) and closed questions (eg. Were you satisfied with the interview?) were incorporated.

Once the questions had all been answered, the tape recorder was switched off. Each interview took between 20 and 40 minutes. Following the interview, the interviewer informed the participant more fully about the study and, in instances where interest was shown, discussed previous research and the findings. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any further questions and were thanked for their participation.

Analysis Procedure

For analysis of the interview tapes, we used a technique described by Minichiello et al. (1990). The researchers listened to each of the tapes on two separate occasions. The first time, answers to each individual question were transcribed onto a prepared index card. There was one card for each question for each participant. The data were then in a form where they could be examined question by question, and participant by participant. This process segmented the data and allowed an indepth study of individual sections of the information. The second time each tape
was listened to without interruption from beginning to end. This provided an overall picture of the data.

Both types of analysis (segmented and overall) provide part of the final picture, and one type of analysis informs the other. Stiles (1993) suggested that replaying recordings of participants is a powerful tool in qualitative analysis where the purpose is to provide an overall picture of the information provided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results will be presented and discussed in two sections. The first will relate to the influence of the relationship between the supervisor and subordinate, and hence the objectivity of the interview. The second section will discuss results relating to perceived usefulness of performance appraisal interviews and satisfaction with the process.

Interactant relationships and objectivity

The supervisors in the present research indicated that they believed that the performance appraisal interview is not an objective process. They agreed that the relationship between the two parties did impact on the appraisal interview. Most of the supervisors felt that previous interactions with their subordinates had an influence. One supervisor explicitly said “each interview was different due to previous interactions and their [the subordinate's] level of confidence and competence”, while another supervisor added that “you interact differently with different people” and “it was different for everyone”. Two of the supervisors referred to bringing “baggage” from previous interactions into the interview. Other supervisors appeared to have
evaluated the interview more favourably if the relationship was good. For example, one supervisor said “[the subordinate] and I get along well, so the review went well”, while another supervisor who was positive about the interview said “[we] have worked together for a while and we have a good relationship”. One of the supervisors evaluated one of the interviews as more positive than the other because “[one subordinate] is more similar to myself in attitude”. These results indicate that the quality of the relationship is an important aspect in the process.

All of the subordinates also said that they believed that their relationship with their supervisor affected their performance appraisal in some way. Some thought it impacted substantially. One person, for example, said “this [the relationship] would impact more than the objective behaviour”. Another subordinate felt that the relationship would have a “major impact”, and one subordinate said that the performance appraisal is “based on [the] personal relationship”.

There appeared to be a link between the relationship being evaluated positively and aspects of the appraisal being evaluated positively (such as the communication). One subordinate said “the good long term relationship makes it [the performance appraisal] easier and more comfortable”. One person attributed her positive performance evaluation directly to the good interpersonal relationship, “mine was good because we have a good relationship”, and someone else said “we have a good working relationship and we shared ideas”. One subordinate referred to the belief that as she had a better relationship with her supervisor (compared to the other subordinates), the supervisor treats her differently (better).

Two subordinates expressed the view that they did not have a good relationship with their supervisor (both subordinates had the same supervisor), and
they said this impacted on their feedback (for example, “[the supervisor] is moody; we get no positive feedback”). They also evaluated the communication negatively.

Five of the other subordinates said that personal attributes of the supervisor impacted on the appraisal. One subordinate said “[the supervisor is] so open-minded, made it different”, and another said that “[the supervisor] does her job very well, [and] uses an open communication process”.

The analysis of the interview data indicated quite strongly that the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate had a pervasive effect on the appraisal interview process. This is an important finding because it implies that the interview may not be as objective as literature on the performance appraisal suggests it should be. As such, this finding is consistent with a recent report by Brommer, Johnson, Rich, Podsakoff, and Mackenzie (1995) who conducted a meta-analysis to examine the relationship between subjective (supervisor ratings) and objective measures of subordinate performance. They found that the objective and subjective ratings are not correlated highly enough to be used interchangeably, and concluded that, if objective measures of performance are desired, supervisor ratings are not suitable.

Usefulness of the interview

The usefulness of the interview was investigated through perceptions of goal achievement and usefulness. Both the supervisors’ and the subordinates’ perceptions of these issues was examined, and the results are reported here separately for each of the participants.

The subordinates were asked about their own goals for the performance appraisal interview. Nine of the subordinates talked about issues related to receiving
feedback on their performance from their supervisor. They referred to a range of feedback: from negative, through neutral, to positive. Most subordinates referred to only positive or negative feedback however, rather than the possibility of receiving a range of feedback. Examples illustrating the range of responses include: “I wanted to find out if I’m doing anything wrong” (negative), “finding out what my manager thought of my performance” (neutral), and “getting a positive evaluation of my work” (positive). More focused on the positive aspects of the feedback, for example: “to ascertain that I was heading down the right track” and “to reinforce that I do an OK-sort-of job”.

Two of the subordinates said that a goal was to address issues related to their relationship with their supervisor (“raise some issues which had been bothering me”). Two other subordinates said that their goals were to “get through the process” and “to get it over and done with”.

Only one of the subordinates referred to communication issues as a goal. This person said that her own goal was for “better communication” with her supervisor. One other subordinate directly referred to the administrative component of the performance appraisal. He was most interested in getting a salary increase. Finally, two of the subordinates stated that they had no goals for the performance appraisal interaction.

From the supervisors’ point of view, five of them referred to finding out what problems the subordinates were having in performing their work. They expressed the desire to help the subordinate work through these problems as being one of the goals of the performance appraisal interview. This is illustrated by one supervisor who said that one of the goals was finding out “what do they need from me”.
Only three of the supervisors included “developing the relationship [between the supervisor and subordinate]” as one of the goals for the interaction. Several said that the interaction would involve “two-way communication”. One supervisor highlighted a potential communication problem, however, noting that “they (the subordinates) are fairly reluctant to talk to me”.

Two supervisors said explicitly that their goal for the interaction was just to get through the process because it is something that they had been told they had to do. For example, one of these supervisors said that their goal was to “complete a process which is a necessary part of remuneration”. Several others referred indirectly to the performance appraisal process as something that they “had to do”. These results support Roberts (1998), who investigated supervisors’ perceptions of theoretical and actual performance appraisals. He found that, although supervisors did not generally want to eliminate performance reviews, most thought that the problems of the review process could not be corrected in practice.

The goals that the supervisors had for the interaction aligned to some extent with subordinate goals. The main difference between the subordinates’ and supervisors’ descriptions of these goals was that the supervisors outlined more negative, or developmental feedback. Subordinates on the other hand referred to the whole range of feedback: from positive, through neutral, to negative. Each individual subordinate did not, however, refer to a range of feedback; they only mentioned one type. Thus, there was a match between the supervisors and subordinates who were looking for developmental feedback. Some of the subordinates appeared to be looking for positive feedback, however, that did not seem to be as important to the supervisors. There was therefore a lesser match, leading to lower satisfaction.
Nevertheless, while considering the goals that people had for the interview, and how well these were satisfied, most participants did not find the performance appraisal interview to be particularly useful for goal-setting.

The subordinates in the present study were also asked directly how useful they believed the interview was to them. They were also asked to consider if their behaviour or beliefs changed in any way as a result of the performance appraisal. A large majority of the subordinates said that they didn’t find the performance appraisal interview process particularly useful, and added that it had not changed their behaviour or beliefs in any way.

One of the subordinates said very forcibly that the process was “not useful”. Others provided comments which supported this belief. These included; “no direct usefulness on day-to-day work”, “no resultant behaviour change” and “just formalising the information”. Many of the subordinates said that it felt nice to get the feedback (positive feedback), but didn’t equate this with any actual usefulness. The comments related to “it boosted self-esteem, morale”, “I feel good about it” and it was “nice to get feedback”.

One subordinate said “a waste of time is too strong a word, but we had already talked about things”, and another said that “it didn’t resolve all of the issues”. Following this line of thought, one person said “[the performance appraisal interview] didn’t cover new ground, [it was a] non-event”. The most negative was the person who said that they “believe they are subjective. There is no measuring…if you get a bad appraisal, it’s hard to argue against it.”.

Most of the subordinates also said that what they were told in the interview was not new information for them. They said that they basically knew what was
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going to be said to them in the interview. One statement which exemplifies this feeling was from a subordinate who said that the interview was “just reinforcing things that we had already talked about”. Other comments in relation to this were that there were “no real surprises”, “it wasn’t a surprise” and “I know the things anyway”.

There were a few exceptions, however. Four of the subordinates did say that they thought the process was useful. One said that she “never walked out of one (a performance appraisal) thinking it was a waste of time”. Another said that it motivated him to “make specific attempts to achieve one of the goals”. It “helped clarify things” was one other person’s comment. This person also said that it was “good to see (that) it was formally (this word was stressed) noted what I had done”.

Most of the subordinates, however, believed that the process did not change their beliefs or how they performed their jobs. Several of the subordinates were quite direct in saying that it was not useful for them. Our impression from these subordinates was that they felt annoyed, or even disappointed about this. It was as though they had higher expectations which were not met. They conceded that the best outcome was that it was nice to hear some positive feedback about themselves, but that this had no real utility other than feeling good.

This is an important revelation because performance appraisal is generally seen to be a process which will benefit subordinates as well as the organisation (Latham & Wexley, 1994). The subordinates in the current sample indicated that the best outcome was that the positive feedback made them feel good. These findings support Halachmi’s (1993) view that performance appraisal may not have much use in organisations.
A further aspect of usefulness involved the performance appraisal interview as a communication medium. The literature relating to performance appraisal suggests interviews between appraiser and appraisee comprise a two-way communication process in which a mutual discussion of performance can occur (Glen, 1990; Latham & Wexley, 1994). The comments from the majority of supervisors in the present research, however, indicate that they did not want, nor did they expect, feedback from their subordinates. Feedback of this nature was not mentioned as a goal except by two of the supervisors. Many said that they saw the interaction as a two-way communication process, but still saw the feedback giving as a one-way process.

Many of the subordinates also discussed the issue of feedback. “Putting thoughts into writing once a year seems a bit silly as we’re doing it all the time anyway”. Another person said “I get feedback on a regular basis and this is much better”. A final comment was “it’s just filling in forms to keep the bureaucracy in a job”.

In summary, almost all of the subordinates had something negative to say about the usefulness of the appraisal process. These negative comments included a range of ideas and beliefs, including; “the process is limited”, “performance appraisals are pathetic”, “assessors have no training” and “not terribly fair”. Other comments related to this issue were; “I hate them. I think they’re an absolute waste of time”, “it was a bit like a visit to the headmaster” and “they’re a bit artificial. I just don’t think they’re appropriate”.

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**Satisfaction**

Although satisfaction has been one of the most investigated subordinate reactions to performance appraisals (Giles & Mossholder, 1990), limited research has investigated the qualitative aspects of performance appraisal interviews. An exception here is Cawley et al. (1998) who suggested that subordinate reactions could be just as important as more technical aspects in relation to the success and effectiveness of an appraisal system.

Further, most performance appraisal research has dealt with the satisfaction subordinates have with the appraisal process, with only little examining the supervisor’s view. An exception is Ilgen, Peterson, Martin, and Boeschen (1981), but all that can be concluded from their results in relation to the supervisors is that their satisfaction was not different to their subordinates’.

In the present study, both supervisors and subordinates were questioned regarding their satisfaction with the performance appraisal interview. Most supervisors said they were moderately satisfied. The following quotes are representative of their feelings. “Fairly good, about 80 - 90% [satisfaction]”, “quite satisfied”, “satisfied, not overly...6.5/10”, and “moderately satisfied”. A few of the supervisors mentioned that there were limitations associated with the situation being a performance appraisal interview. These limitations were reported as affecting their overall satisfaction. One supervisor indicated that the interviews “were fine within the constraints of our reporting system”, and another said they were “satisfied considering the limitations of that role”. Furthermore, one supervisor added that
Later published as Formal performance appraisal interviews: Can they really be objective, and are they useful anyway? Asia-pacific Journal of Human Resource Management, 39(2) 83-97

“further informal discussion were a lot more satisfying”. Overall, it would seem that the supervisors were moderately satisfied, but still thought there were some problems.

Finally, it is worth noting that satisfaction with the process, and the subordinates’ perceptions of how useful the process was, did not seem to be related. Most of the subordinates said they were “quite satisfied”, “satisfied” or “very satisfied with the conversation”. Many also said “no problems”. One subordinate said they came out thinking “What was I worried about?”.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results from this research suggest that formal performance appraisal interviews, unless they can be improved, currently have limited usefulness in organisations. It seems that while many of the supervisors and subordinates we interviewed were moderately satisfied with the process, they did not find formal appraisal interviews particularly useful. Further, they indicated that the relationships between the appraisal interview participants affected the outcome, placing its subjectivity in doubt.

Our data indicate that, when supervisors give timely, on-going feedback to their subordinates, the formal performance review may be a waste of time because it does not contribute anything new. On the other hand, when the supervisor does not give useful feedback throughout the year, this does not change in the annual review; their feedback is still not useful.

As a consequence, the emphasis put on a formal review process in the last decade in Australia may have been misguided. Our conclusion, that on-going, timely
feedback is important for employee development, is supported by a large body of literature (see for example Schay, 1993). We believe that the formal performance review may not add anything worthwhile beyond this feedback giving.

The major limitation of this qualitative study is that only a small number of participants were included (as is generally the nature of qualitative research, see Sekaran, 1992). It means, that generalisations can be made with less certainty. Further, one of the researchers was also the interviewer and the analyst. This is potentially a limitation because the researcher has biases that may influence the questions asked, as well as the process of analysis.

In order to resolve the problems we have identified in the formal review interview process, we believe that supervisors need greater training and development in relation to on-going feedback skills. For many supervisors, the initiation of a review process has placed them in a position that requires specific skills, but many are not given any training in these skills. Giving on-going feedback should be considered one of the important management skills that are needed in supervisory positions. If the organisation continues to use performance reviews, then there is a responsibility to ensure that staff members can successfully conduct this as an on-going process. We suggest, however, that the key to improving performance appraisal may be to abandon the formal review interview, and to place emphasis on giving feedback (both negative and positive) as close in time as possible to the behaviour occurring.

We do acknowledge, however, that not all supervisors will be able to develop good feedback-giving skills. For this reason, we believe it may be valuable to reexamine the design of work to increase as much as possible the feedback the worker receives directly from the job itself. This would then reduce the reliance on effective

supervision. This is particularly important considering the evidence from our research in relation to the strong effect of the relationship between the participants, and the inherent subjectivity of the appraisal process.

Finally, future research could investigate ways to improve the benefits of performance appraisal, and to minimise negative outcomes. It may be that subsequent research will show that the benefits of performance appraisal can be obtained through other human resource processes already being utilised (such as ongoing feedback, annual increments, etc) and that the negatives associated with performance appraisal can be minimised by eliminating performance appraisal (in its current form) completely. In particular, future research should examine how useful the performance appraisal is in relation to achieving the goals of the organisation, as well as how useful the appraisal is at improving the quality of the working life of the individual involved in the appraisal.

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Later published as "Formal performance appraisal interviews: Can they really be objective, and are they useful anyway?" Asia-pacific Journal of Human Resource Management, 39(2) 83-97.


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