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Performance appraisal systems for agricultural extension personnel: Current practices and reform proposals

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Abstract

Agricultural extension services across sub-Saharan Africa are only as effective as the people who deliver them, yet the systems used to evaluate those people remain outdated and poorly designed. This research assessed the current performance appraisal practices applied to extension personnel in five provinces of Zimbabwe and proposed reform measures. A cross-sectional survey of 186 extension officers and 42 supervisors was conducted between February and September 2023. Results showed that 74.2% of officers received appraisals only once per year, and 63.4% reported that appraisal criteria did not reflect their actual field responsibilities. Correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive association between appraisal frequency and self-reported job performance ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$). Supervisors identified lack of standardized tools (81.0%) and heavy administrative workloads (69.0%) as primary barriers to conducting meaningful appraisals. The research proposes a reformed appraisal model incorporating multi-source feedback, outcome-based indicators, and quarterly review cycles. These findings point to an urgent need for rethinking how extension personnel are evaluated if service quality is to improve.

Keywords: Performance appraisal, extension personnel, agricultural extension, human resource management, job performance, appraisal reform, feedback systems, extension officers, supervisory practices

Introduction

Most agricultural extension officers in Africa are evaluated with tools that were designed for desk-based civil servants, not field workers who spend their days traveling between farms, organizing demonstrations, and mediating between farmers and input suppliers ^[1]. This mismatch between what extension officers actually do and how they are appraised creates frustration, reduces motivation, and leaves managers without reliable information about staff effectiveness ^[2].

Performance appraisal in public sector extension services has received far less research attention than topics like technology adoption or participatory methods ^[3]. In Zimbabwe, the Department of Agricultural, Technical, and Extension Services (AGRITEX) uses a standardized civil service appraisal form that was last updated over a decade ago ^[4]. Extension supervisors have repeatedly flagged concerns that this form captures administrative compliance rather than advisory quality or farmer outcomes ^[5].

International literature on performance management suggests that appraisal systems work best when they are frequent, based on measurable outcomes, and include feedback from multiple sources ^[6]. But translating these principles into resource-constrained extension systems is not straightforward. Supervisors face large spans of control, limited transport, and competing administrative demands that make regular field-based appraisal difficult ^[7].

This research examined current appraisal practices for extension personnel in Zimbabwe and identified specific reform directions. Three objectives guided the work:

- Describing the frequency, format, and perceived relevance of existing appraisals,
- Testing whether appraisal frequency relates to job performance, and
- Gathering reform recommendations from both officers and supervisors.

Theoretical framework

The research drew on expectancy theory ^[8], which holds that employee motivation depends on the belief that effort leads to performance, performance leads to outcomes, and those outcomes are valued. When appraisal systems fail to link effort with recognized performance, motivation declines. A second lens was goal-setting theory ^[9], which predicts that specific, measurable goals with regular feedback improve performance more than vague annual targets. Together, these frameworks suggested that current appraisal systems in Zimbabwe's extension service may undermine motivation by providing infrequent, non-specific feedback disconnected from meaningful rewards or development opportunities.

Material and Methods

Material

The research was conducted across five provinces in Zimbabwe (Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Manicaland, Midlands, and Masvingo) between February and September 2023. A total of 186 extension officers were selected using proportional stratified sampling from AGRITEX personnel records, stratified by province and years of service. Additionally, 42 extension supervisors

(ward and district level) were purposively included. A structured questionnaire measured appraisal experiences, perceived relevance, and reform preferences using five-point Likert scales and open-ended items. A supervisor questionnaire captured appraisal practices, barriers, and reform opinions. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Agriculture Ethics Board (Protocol UZ-FA-2023-012, January 2023).

Methods

Questionnaires were administered face-to-face at provincial AGRITEX offices. Self-reported job performance was measured using a validated 10-item scale adapted from Borman and Motowidlo^[10], yielding scores from 0 to 100. Appraisal frequency was recorded as times per year. Pearson correlation tested the association between frequency and performance. Descriptive statistics summarized appraisal practices. Open-ended responses were

content-analyzed to identify reform themes. Data were analyzed using SPSS 28. A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was applied throughout.

Instrument development and validation

The Extension Personnel Appraisal Experience Questionnaire (EPAEQ) was constructed with 22 items across three domains: appraisal process (8 items), perceived relevance (7 items), and reform preferences (7 items). Content validity was assessed by five human resource management experts in agricultural organizations, who confirmed item relevance and clarity. Pilot testing with 24 officers from a non-sampled province led to rewording of three items. Internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$ for process, 0.78 for relevance, 0.71 for reform). Test-retest reliability over three weeks was satisfactory ($r = 0.79$).

Results

Table 1: Current appraisal practices reported by extension officers (n = 186)

Appraisal Characteristic	n	%
Appraisal frequency		
Once per year	138	74.2
Twice per year	31	16.7
More than twice	11	5.9
Never appraised	6	3.2
Criteria reflect field work		
Strongly agree / Agree	68	36.6
Neutral	37	19.9
Disagree / Strongly disagree	81	43.5
Feedback received after appraisal		
Written and verbal	29	15.6
Verbal only	94	50.5
No feedback given	63	33.9

Three-quarters of officers (74.2%) were appraised only once per year. Nearly half (43.5%) disagreed that appraisal

criteria reflected their actual field responsibilities, and a third (33.9%) received no feedback after being appraised.

Table 2: Barriers to effective appraisal identified by supervisors (n = 42)

Barrier	n	%
Lack of standardized appraisal tools	34	81.0
Heavy administrative workload	29	69.0
Limited transport for field verification	27	64.3
No training in appraisal techniques	23	54.8
Large number of officers to supervise	21	50.0
Appraisal not linked to rewards or sanctions	18	42.9

The most cited barrier was absence of standardized tools (81.0%), followed by heavy workloads (69.0%) and limited transport (64.3%). Nearly half of supervisors noted that

appraisal results were not connected to any rewards or consequences.

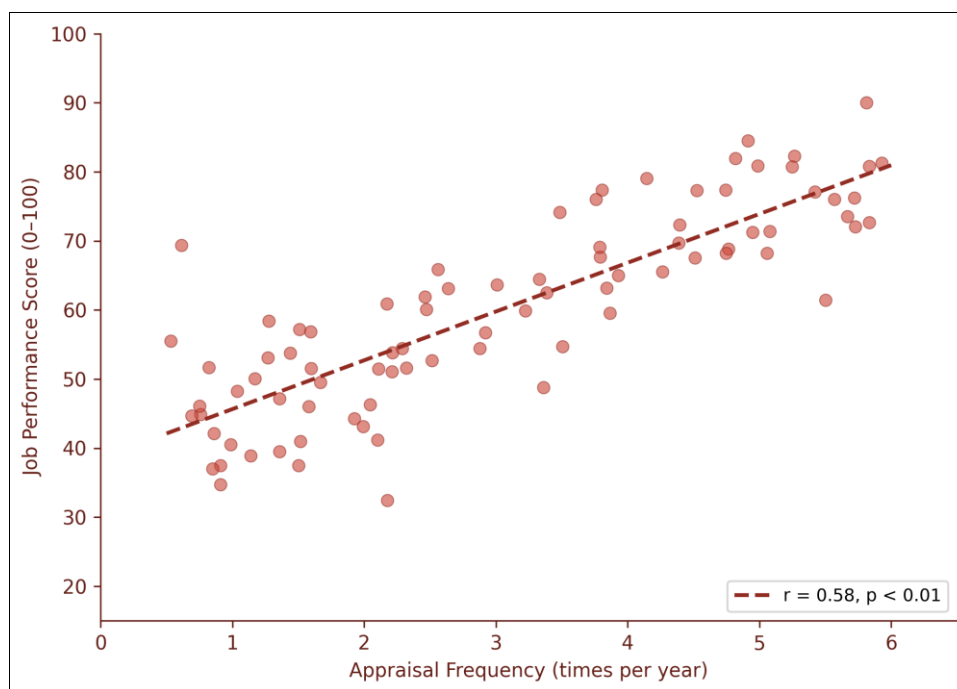


Fig 1: Relationship between appraisal frequency and self-reported job performance (n = 186)

A moderate positive correlation was observed between appraisal frequency and job performance score ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$). Officers appraised more than twice per year tended

to report higher performance scores, though variability was substantial at all frequency levels.

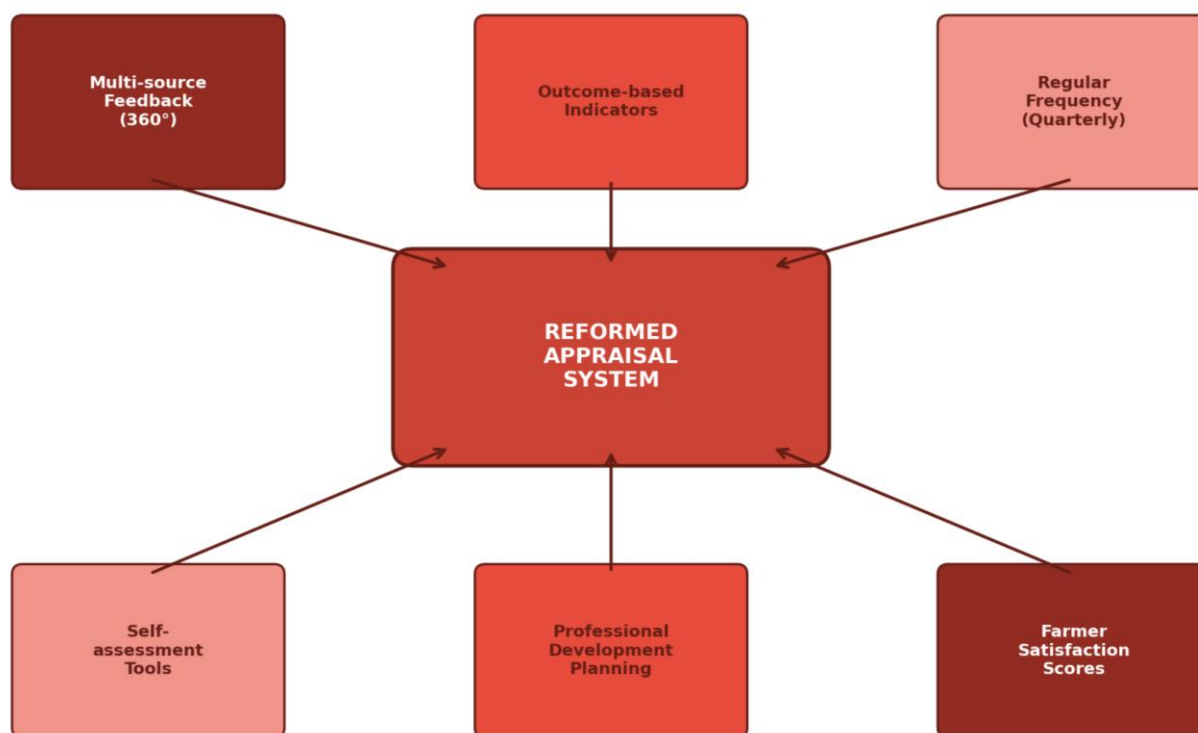


Fig 2: Proposed reformed performance appraisal model for extension personnel

The reformed model integrates six components: multi-source (360°) feedback, outcome-based indicators, quarterly review frequency, self-assessment tools, professional development planning, and farmer satisfaction scores. Each element feeds into a unified appraisal framework designed to reflect field-based extension work.

Discussion

The finding that most extension officers in Zimbabwe receive only annual appraisals with criteria misaligned to their work confirms concerns raised by earlier assessments of public sector extension management in the region [4, 5]. Annual appraisals are too infrequent to guide performance improvement, and when criteria focus on administrative

compliance rather than advisory quality, they send the wrong signals about what is valued ^[6].

The positive correlation between appraisal frequency and job performance is consistent with goal-setting theory ^[9], which predicts that regular feedback strengthens the link between effort and outcomes. That said, the cross-sectional design means we can't confirm direction -it is possible that higher-performing officers receive more attention from supervisors rather than more frequent appraisal causing better performance.

The barriers reported by supervisors are structural, not attitudinal. Supervisors wanted to conduct better appraisals but lacked tools, time, and transport to do so ^[7]. This suggests that reform must address organizational capacity alongside instrument redesign. The proposed multi-source model draws on practices tested in health extension systems ^[11] and private-sector agriculture ^[12], adapted to the resource realities of Zimbabwe's public extension service.

Limitations

Self-reported job performance may be inflated by social desirability. The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation of the appraisal-performance relationship. Only five of Zimbabwe's ten provinces were sampled. The reformed model is a proposal based on evidence synthesis and stakeholder input but has not yet been field-tested. Future research should pilot the model in selected districts and measure its effects on both officer performance and farmer outcomes over time.

Conclusion

Performance appraisal systems for extension personnel in Zimbabwe are infrequent, misaligned with field responsibilities, and disconnected from meaningful feedback or professional development. The strong association between appraisal frequency and job performance suggests that more regular evaluation, when done well, may contribute to better service delivery.

The proposed reformed model moves away from annual box-ticking toward quarterly, outcome-focused reviews that incorporate farmer feedback and self-assessment. But instruments alone won't fix the problem. Supervisors need manageable caseloads, transport for field visits, and training in constructive feedback techniques. Extension organizations should recognize that investing in better personnel management is not an administrative luxury -it directly affects the quality of advice that reaches farmers. Piloting the reformed model in a small number of districts would provide evidence on its feasibility and impact before wider implementation across the national extension system.

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