



360° feedback: a critical enquiry

360° feedback: a
critical enquiry

Arthur Morgan and Kath Cannan

University of Glamorgan Business School, Pontypridd, UK, and

Joanne Cullinane

University of Greenwich Business School, Greenwich, UK

663

Abstract

Purpose – The underpinning assumption in the adoption of 360° feedback is that it heightens an individual's self-awareness by highlighting differences between how participants see themselves and how others see them. This statement implies that awareness motivates development and improves performance. This paper critically examines the introduction of 360° feedback in the civil service, drawing on the experiences of the Patent Office and taking account of the wider context of civil service modernisation.

Design/methodology/approach – The case study gathered data through a series of interviews and questionnaires. It sought the perceptions and experiences of management and participants in relation to the implementation process and the outcomes of the scheme.

Findings – At an organisational level the use of 360° feedback, as a performance management tool, failed to develop the self-awareness anticipated. Neither was it found to be aligned with other development plans or the organisation's core competencies. At an individual level some participants believed that they achieved little from the process overall and this may be related to an expectation that the organisation's HRM system would be more proactive in planning development action on their behalf.

Practical implications – This research reflects the situation in one organisation. It is argued that the findings will have relevance for the wider civil service as the agenda for organisational efficiency, target setting, and performance improvement gathers momentum.

Originality/value – This paper takes a critical perspective on whether HR developments such as 360° feedback have a deep-seated strategic rationale. It also explores the relationship between 360° feedback and the new public management.

Keywords 360-degree feedback, Public sector organizations, Public sector reform, Civil service

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years the UK public sector has been undergoing “reform” and “modernisation” reflective of an agenda often referred to as “new public management” (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Clarke *et al.*, 2000). This agenda reflects a largely neo-liberal ideology and stresses the importance of the reformulation of the public sector so that responsibility can be contractually identified. Moreover, sectarian interests and “producer capture” can be lessened or mitigated by increased accountability (Kaboolian, 1998). The “new public management” in the UK has resulted in a broad ranging restructuring that includes the development of ministerial targets, service contracts, the separation of service delivery from evaluation, alongside the adoption of private sector-style management practices including human resource management (Clarke *et al.*, 2000). These changes can be characterised as a trend towards making the traditional bureaucratic-based administration of the public sector more transparent, measurable and thereby more accountable for performance (Bach and Della Rocca, 2000).



In relation to human resource management practices, there are a number of strands of reform. In the UK civil service, during 2004 and 2005, the top priority to deliver this modernisation agenda is to transform public services to better meet the needs of consumers (Cabinet Office, 2004a). One of the major themes is a requirement that all departments and agencies work towards new pay and appraisal systems, to encourage organisational changes necessary to deliver accountability through the introduction of performance management practices (Cabinet Office, 2004b). The emphasis from central government on measuring performance is particularly relevant to wider reform in the public sector including the civil service. A shift towards the concept of performance management in particular is noted by Bach (2000) who suggests that it provides a strategic opportunity for managing, assessing and developing the performance of employees in the current environment.

The key driver to introduce a performance feedback process into the UK civil service was Sir Richard Wilson's report on civil service reform, which specifically suggested the introduction of 360° feedback for senior civil servants by the end of 2001 (Cabinet Office, 1999). The underpinning assumption for this development was that a key criterion for good leadership is self-awareness (Cabinet Office, 1999) and that "if done well, it is a very powerful tool of management and a very good way of helping people improve their own performance" (Wilson, cited in Moore, 2000, p. 15).

The role of 360° feedback, as an element of the "new public management", is designed to objectify, make known and measure performance (Townley, 1993). Yet such intent is not without a range of attendant tensions which arise from the "relatively diffuse nature of management authority" that is captured imperfectly by a "strategic choice framework which may exaggerate the scope for autonomous management action" (Bach and Della Rocca, 2000).

This paper examines critically the introduction of 360° feedback in the civil service drawing on the experiences of the Patent Office, which has recently moved to make 360° feedback available to all of its managers. The paper explores three specific issues. First, it examines the organisation's rationale for the introduction of 360° feedback. Second, it considers the strategic alignment of 360° feedback and, third, it evaluates participants' perceptions of the value of the 360° feedback scheme used in the Patent Office as an illustration of the wider reform process in the UK civil service.

360° feedback: theory and practice

Ward (1997, p. 4) describes 360° feedback as "the systematic collection and feedback of performance data on an individual or group, derived from a number of the stakeholders in their performance". Assessment through 360° feedback is normally via a questionnaire completed by a "stakeholder" in the individual's performance: those who work closely enough with the manager to respond to questions about their behaviour and its impact. The data is then fed back to the participant, in a way that is intended to result in acceptance of the information and the formulation of a development plan (Ward, 1997).

The literature on 360° feedback falls into main three categories:

- (1) Accounts by consultancy firms that promote the benefits whilst urging caution due to potential pitfalls (Kanouse, 1998). A critical assessment of these studies might conclude that they are seeking to promote their services (Bach, 2000).

-
- (2) Organisational-based management surveys of the process (Handy *et al.*, 1996 and, in particular Brighton and Hove Council, IRS, 2000).
 - (3) Academic orientated empirical research (Mabey, 2001).

Yet despite the “remarkable” speed, with which organisations are adopting 360° feedback (Fletcher, 1997), Antonioni and Park (2001) point out that supportive empirical research has been slow to emerge. For example, Brutus *et al.* (1999) argue that although 360° feedback is popular, albeit expensive for the organisation, there have been few attempts to investigate its impact on individual development. This point is important because as DeNisi and Kluger (2000) stress, unless the effectiveness of 360° feedback is studied, evidence of how it can be used to improve performance will not be available.

Setting aside for a moment the limited empirical evidence, a key issue that underpins the problematic adoption of 360° feedback is that the views and experiences of participants have been largely ignored (Mabey, 2001). In line with Mabey’s arguments, such omissions should not be overlooked. When it comes to a question of success or failure, the efficacy and face validity of the system will be important and this relies, to a large extent, on how far individuals accept the processes. As Geake and Gray (2001, p. 3) argue, “the specifically individual focus of the 360° feedback process would suggest a very real need to evaluate the ‘fall out’ in respect of how individuals reacted to the process”. Commitment to action is particularly important and if no follow-up activity ensues, there is a danger that the system will swiftly lose credibility.

Research that has been undertaken to date presents a rather mixed response from participants. Perhaps the most notable work on perceptions of managers to 360° feedback in a UK context was a study by Mabey (2001). He examined managers’ reactions at the Open University during 360° feedback process implementation. This study established that many managers perceived that they had not developed a particularly different understanding of themselves, but the process had reinforced the direction of their development. Interestingly, as Mabey (2001) notes, in contrast to assumptions made by other commentators, some participants suggested the process would gain more if results were not private as their accountability to act might be increased. Yet the availability of individual results might increase what McCauley and Moxley (1996, p. 17-8) call the “approach avoidance reaction to feedback”, meaning that managers may wish to understand the perceptions of those around them, yet may be concerned about hearing their weaknesses and try to control the possibility of negative feedback.

As Garavan *et al.* (1997) note, there is considerable literature which expresses the perceived benefits of 360° feedback. These include offering a broader perspective for individual participants. Handy *et al.* (1996, p. 13) emphasise, “different groups of employees together hold a unique mirror that enables an individual to see, perhaps for the first time, how his or her actions are understood and interpreted” and as such may be a key component in management development (Hazucha *et al.*, 1993). Brutus *et al.* (1998) note that goal-setting theory indicates that managers will set goals to improve if they realise that other people’s perceptions of them differ from their own. Therefore, a key question emerging from the current literature is whether 360° feedback actually raises participants’ “self-awareness” which in this setting. Fletcher and Baldry (2000) define as the level of congruence between self-ratings and ratings from others.

There appears to be a significant factor that differentiates 360° feedback from other forms of appraisal in terms of its relationship to performance management. According to Turnow (1993, cited in Armstrong and Baron, 1998), it is the relationship with self-awareness and the commitment to change through a development plan that is fundamental to the 360° feedback process. This assertion rests on two main assumptions: a realisation of the difference between how we see ourselves and how others see us leads to greater self-awareness (McCarthy and Garavan, 1999), and second, that self-awareness is vital for improving performance as a manager and leader, and should be seen as a “foundation block” for management development programmes. However, the findings of Mabey (2001) do not concur with this, as many of the participants at the Open University felt that their self-awareness was not increased.

Bach (2000) notes that underpinning assumptions about 360° feedback do not differ from traditional appraisal, as it shares the theory that measurement of performance will lead to improvement. There is empirical evidence, however, to suggest that this may not always occur in reality. For example, a meta-analysis of empirical studies conducted by DeNisi and Kluger (2000, p. 130) found that 38 per cent of the effects of 360° feedback on performance were actually “negative”. Atwater *et al.* (2002) also found that only 50 per cent of the managers in their study were able to identify improvements in their performance following feedback.

Despite numerous positive descriptions of the potential benefits of 360° feedback, some studies give reason to question whether any real development actually occurs, or whether the process is as positive an experience as suggested (Atwater *et al.*, 2002). Given that the empirical evidence is equivocal about the benefits of 360° feedback, it is important that this issue be explored further. As Ward (1997, p. 39) notes, “if you don’t know of the pitfalls in advance you are more likely to fall into them unawares”. Commonly cited problems include: measuring performance may not lead to improvement, the attitude of the participant manager is critical if the process is to be effective, and the feedback gathered may not be utilised. However, in terms of growing commitment to the system Waldman and Bowen (1998) indicate this is more likely to improve with time. This is because managers become more assured of senior management commitment and their intentions surrounding the process become clearer.

In response to these type of findings, DeNisi and Kluger (2000) proposed that if feedback focuses on task-level criteria, and the individual is able to envisage improvement, 360° feedback will have a positive impact. However, if the feedback focuses on self-concept it may lead to negative reactions and adversely affect performance. This suggests that the quality, nature and possibly the source of feedback received are all determining factors in its overall value. As Fletcher (1997) notes for 360° feedback to be effective, the participant managers must be prepared to put aside the established hierarchy, power bases and prerogatives and accept feedback from peers and “subordinates”. Given that such egalitarian influences are not usual in most organisations, Bernadin *et al.* (1993, in Garavan *et al.*, 1997) suggest that middle managers might flatter and influence subordinates to try to ensure positive ratings, but take advantage of the anonymity to provide harsh ratings for superiors they perceive to be overly demanding. Conversely, Fletcher (1997) comments that subordinates and peers called upon to act as evaluators may feel threatened by the process and consequently dilute their comments for fear of reprisal.

The implicit process of stepping outside of the organisational hierarchy may also result in 360° feedback contributing to culture change. Whilst cultural change is not uncommonly associated with management development programmes (Storey and Sisson, 1993) the literature reveals mixed views on whether 360° feedback is able to contribute to culture change or whether the culture has to be the “right one” before the feedback process can be made to work effectively. Chivers and Darling (1999) suggest that 360° feedback contributes to opening the organisational culture. By contrast Farrell in IRS (2000, p. 5) notes that “360° feedback will struggle in any organisation that has a low level of openness and trust” and similarly Iles (2001) highlights the importance of existing organisational structures and team working in considering the outcomes of 360° feedback. Furthermore, the people involved may prove to be the most important factor because “like performance appraisals and assessment centres, 360° feedback depends on the capability to generate reliable data from unreliable sources (that is, people)” (Bracken *et al.*, 2001, p. 6).

The contested debate about the consequences of 360° feedback provides the backdrop for assessing its introduction in the Patent Office. The Patent Office, a department of the UK civil service, has been undergoing a process of reform and modernisation like other parts of the public sector.

Organisational context: the patent office

The Patent Office is an Executive Agency of the Department for Trade and Industry and is responsible for the establishment and maintenance of the national framework of intellectual property rights (IPR). The Patent Office’s (2004) mission states that they:

... stimulate innovation and enhance the international competitiveness of British Industry and commerce. We offer customers an accessible, high quality, value for money system both national and international, for granting intellectual property rights. We develop staff to meet this mission.

The organisation became a Trading Fund in 1991, operating as a semi-autonomous entity, and is separated into five directorates employing just over 1,000 staff. The majority of staff are located at Newport, South Wales with a small number at an office in London. The workforce is a mix of specialist patent and trademark examiners (approximately 26 per cent of the total workforce) and generalist civil servants (approximately 73 per cent of the workforce below chief executive and director level) [1].

Currently, the Patent Office is facing a particularly challenging operational environment given the IPR environment at a global level (Patent Office, 2003). The organisation’s managers recognise that it confronts a disparate range of stakeholders and a growth in competition from the international intellectual property community. These pressures have led managers to acknowledge that the Patent Office needs to examine new ways of working to ensure it retains a strong position (Patent Office, 2003). The introduction of a 360° feedback system may be a key factor in enabling a more focussed approach to performance management.

Managerial performance was highlighted as one specific area for organisational improvement and the organisation has undertaken several initiatives in this respect. For example, an early form of 360° feedback was introduced for all managers in 1994 through a process called the “LAMP” (Leadership and Management Programme). However, enthusiasm for LAMP declined over time. Participants identified the lack of

anonymity as problematic because it discouraged critical feedback; offering little confidence in its value for development purposes.

The operation of 360 degree feedback within the Patent Office

During 2002 a small pilot project was conducted. The pilot study sample involved 28 participants selected by senior managers, potentially skewing the findings. It utilised an internet-based 360° feedback instrument, and participants were required to nominate a range of people to provide anonymous feedback, including managers, direct reports, junior staff, peers, and internal customers. The individual then assessed themselves against a range of competencies: initially deciding which were most important in their role, and then rating how they felt they demonstrated the behaviours. Colleagues then rated the individual according to their perception of the manager, and they also had an opportunity to expand on their views through written comments. Following receipt of the feedback, each participant met with an occupational psychologist to discuss their feedback and plan development actions.

Following this pilot in July 2003, the 360° feedback process became a key but voluntary component of a broader-based management development programme called the “Development Road Map” (DRM). The DRM promulgated a range of mandatory and voluntary training and development activities and these activities linked to the organisation’s previously defined core competencies (which again, arise out of the broader UK civil service reform). Although participation in 360° feedback was not compulsory, managers were “strongly encouraged” to undertake the process every two years.

As the role of 360° feedback within this programme is considered to be developmental, there is no direct link to remuneration. However, there are clear but indirect links to the existing performance management system. It is expected that managers will use their 360° feedback to inform their Personal Achievement Plan (PAP) which should, in turn, be discussed at regular performance reviews. In structuring the use of 360° feedback in this voluntarist manner, the Patent Office anticipated a level of commitment from managers to pursue a programme of personal development.

Research design

A predominantly interpretist perspective was adopted by the researchers that aimed to investigate the “subjective reality” of the individuals involved, recognising that it is their interpretation that affects the way they react to any situation (Saunders *et al.*, 2003). This is appropriate for the research objectives which assume that the views of 360° feedback participants are their “reality”, and only by understanding their perspectives can the programme at the Patent Office be assessed. In the light of this assumption, this study was not aiming to measure “reality”, but instead “understand what is happening in a situation and looking for patterns which may be repeated in other similar situations” (Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p. 50).

Three issues were identified for exploration: participant perception of the process; the effect of the process on self-awareness; and what happened following participation. The use of both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were considered useful in maximising the strengths and minimising the weaknesses of both techniques to ensure that the findings were more reliable. This mixed approach

also enabled a broader sample to be obtained and allowed specific issues to be explored in more depth.

Twenty-eight managers who were involved in the pilot 360° feedback programme in the summer of 2002 were included in the survey. This group represented a range of management grades from first line manager to divisional director, taken from a cross-section of directorates. In addition, a further group of 12 middle managers were included from the administration and resources directorate. This group had used the same 360° feedback process in November 2001 as part of a management development centre process. The role of this second group was to explore whether there appeared to be any different reactions to the process given the different setting in which feedback was both provided and received.

In total, the two groups represent approximately ten per cent of the people managers in the Patent Office at grades below that of senior civil servant. However, as the majority of the original 360° feedback group were selected by management the sample cannot be described as a random sample. Consequently, the small percentage of staff involved in the pilot study, and the method of their selection, does not allow strong generalisations to be made from the findings. However, it was considered that by approaching all those who had participated to give their views in an interview situation, or via questionnaire, that a sufficiently accurate picture of the use of 360° feedback within the organisation could be established.

A total of 16 interviews were also undertaken. Twelve interviews were conducted with 360° feedback participants from a range of grades and directorates. Interviews were also held with what Patton (2002, p. 321) describes as a “key informants” these included two Directors, the Chief Executive, and in addition the Senior Training Manager, who had been involved in developing and overseeing the implementation of the policy related to 360° feedback.

Following on from these interviews, a questionnaire was designed and sent to all those who were not interviewed with a covering e-mail explaining the purpose of the research. The purpose of this questionnaire was to follow-up the findings from the initial interviews and to explore some of the important issues that had emerged from the literature with a greater number of 360° feedback participants. A total of 26 questionnaires were issued, and 21 were completed and returned. Of the returns 16 were male and five female, graded between a B2 and divisional director with 14 at grade B2 or B3, which is at the lower end of a middle management scale. Fourteen of the total returns had been in a managerial grade for over six years, and 16 respondents had been employed in the civil service for over ten years.

Research findings

Links between 360-feedback and the Patent Office's HR strategy

Three key issues emerged from key informant interviews on the relationship between 360° feedback and its links with organisational strategy:

- (1) 360° feedback could facilitate better working relations;
- (2) delivering the strategy demands greater flexibility than some managers currently displayed; and
- (3) the introduction of 360° feedback would be a potential “supporting arm” for culture change.

In addition, the director responsible for personnel and training identified a further role for 360° feedback in the promotion process, accepting that such a role must be driven by the individuals themselves and not led by the organisation. This suggestion implies the 360° process is able to offer an additional somewhat different function than that of a simple performance or development tool. However, it would require thoughtful integration if it was intended to be introduced and operated in the way suggested (Table I).

Participants' perceptions of 360° feedback's overall value

A number of positive reactions to the 360° feedback process were expressed by participants. Some interviewees noted that although receiving the feedback might be difficult, it was still important to hear colleagues' perceptions. For example:

anything critical I have seen, my first instinctive reaction is "what the hell are they talking about?"; but if it is repeated. . .and you find several people have said it, you've got to face the facts, either it's just simply true, or it's their perception of you, which is just as important.

Certainly in a face-to-face-appraisal I'd have probably said "well, what do you think" and they'd have probably said "well everything's fine".

However, it is significant that a small number of interviewees felt the process had been of little value to them. One interviewee also raised doubts about the usefulness of the process generally:

I'm just the sort of person that thinks that if you have a problem with someone you should talk to them about it and address it that way. . . I can't honestly say that there was anything that helped me in any way. . .

Similar comments were made by another interviewee:

It just seemed a huge expense for no particular benefit. . . I don't know whether that was because of the fact that nothing happened after I saw the [occupational psychologist]. . . I carried on regardless afterwards.

Another theme in the responses was that the inherent value of the process was diminished by its anonymity. Many participants found it difficult to deal with unexpected feedback because they were either unable to address the problems with the

Table I.
Summary of key findings from the questionnaire – 21 participants' perceptions of 360° feedback's overall value

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
360° feedback has been useful for my personal and professional development	13	5	3
The criteria that I was assessed against were valid and related to my role	16	2	3
A meeting with an external consultant to discuss my feedback helped me to interpret my feedback and focus on my development needs	14	2	5
I feel that the 360° feedback process is useful for my development as a manager	14	6	1
I believe that my performance has improved because of 360° feedback	10	5	6
I found the process motivated me to develop myself	12	1	8

individual concerned and/or perturbed that the nature of the problem had not been made apparent earlier:

I was personally disappointed that people who had issue with me couldn't address this with me face to face ... it was certainly more of a personal attack than constructive criticism (at least this is what it felt like).

Similarly, some participants, rather than attempting to control the ratings, reported aiming to access a "warts and all" range of feedback. Indeed, a number of participants approached people to provide feedback who they considered they may have difficulties connecting with.

The feedback process was followed by a meeting with an impartial occupational psychologist. However, views of participants were strongly polarised – those participants who appreciated the inclusion of this stage in the process felt it gave their feedback particular value:

... without that I think it's fairly worthless. ... They can say ... "if people are seeing you like that, are you sure you are not really like that?" ... If it was a line manager doing it, it would be a much more awkward situation.,

Compared to:

... no matter how carefully an outside consultant prepares, they won't really understand the culture of the organisation as well as someone from within it does...

Participants' opinions about the impact of 360° feedback on their management development were also mixed. Some participants clearly believed the process contributed to their development as a manager – a total of seven interviewees and 14 questionnaire respondents, and interestingly one interviewee drew attention to witnessing positive changes in their own manager following that manager's feedback. However, others were less sure whether it had added value to their development as a manager (Table II).

Impact on self-awareness

For some of the respondents their perception was that the process had not told them anything particularly "new" about their behaviour. Comments included:

I had no surprises in it, I know how I work, I know my faults and I know my good points as well ...

I can't honestly say that I was enlightened as a result of the whole exercise. ... I am aware of things I need to watch out for and things that I know that I do well and that people appreciate.

In support of this, 13 questionnaire respondents agreed with the statement "the feedback I received matched my own assessment of my strengths and development needs". Further probing in the interviews did reveal that some of the participants who

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
The feedback I received matched my own assessment of my strengths and development needs	13	2	6
Receiving 360° feedback has helped me to better understand my strengths and development needs	14	3	4

Table II. Summary of key findings from the questionnaire – effect of the process on self-awareness

claimed their self-awareness was not raised, did provide examples where they had learnt something “new”, or were more self-aware having received feedback over time. In addition, one person admitted to being “pleasantly surprised” by the feedback, as their raters had rated them higher in some areas than they had rated themselves. Another interviewee had developed a better understanding of others’ perceptions and was working to address issues raised:

... because I’ve seen it on paper, I’ve thought okay I know I’m doing it, now people have actually said it, its time to deal with it and change things, which I’ve done...

Similarly, 13 questionnaire respondents agreed that “receiving 360° feedback has helped to ‘better understand my strengths and development needs” (Table III).

Action following feedback

In general then, a pattern emerged that most participants did report having their development needs reinforced, their consciousness raised, and they felt more obligated to modify their behaviour because others had identified a particular need. Indeed, a high number felt that they had changed the way they work as a result of the feedback, indicating that the process may not necessarily lead to specific development activities but may inform a more general approach. As one interviewee put it, “it’s just another piece of information that you carry with you”.

Although the feedback may not necessarily have resulted in universally increased self-awareness, it may have encouraged participants to take action on their development needs:

... because I’ve seen it on paper, I’ve thought okay I know I’m doing it, now people have actually said it, its time to deal with it and change things, which I’ve done...

However, a high number of both interviewees and questionnaire respondents felt that they had taken little or no specific development action following their feedback. Just seven of the questionnaire respondents said that they had undertaken the training and development that the 360° feedback identified as necessary. Only four questionnaire respondents and three interviewees had used the feedback to write their PAP. Comments included:

In all honesty, in terms of what has been done since, nothing, absolutely nothing.

Not a great deal, other than taking on board the bits which I thought were critical of me and trying to remember to do things differently...

Table III.
Summary of key findings from the questionnaire – action taken following feedback

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
I have made changes to the way I work because of my 360° feedback	15	2	4
I have used the 360° feedback to write my PAP	4	4	13
I have undertaken the training and development that the 360° feedback identified as necessary	7	6	8
I have received support in taking development action following the feedback	8	7	6
I have discussed the outcome of my 360° feedback with my manager	10	1	10

A number of interviewees had, however, made some changes. Some were self-driven and not as a result of training courses:

I am conscious of the things that I'm not doing, which I thought I was, so I do try and do something about that.

This is supported by responses to the questionnaire, as 15 people agreed with the statement that "I have made changes to the way I work because of my 360° feedback".

Only two interviewees had actively discussed their feedback with their team, although 16 questionnaire respondents had done so. Some interviewees expected to be approached following the 360-feedback:

There is nothing further down the line to see if you have done it and there has been no contact since with anybody. Until you spoke to me, it had been stuck in my drawer and I had forgotten all about it to be honest.

Although the Patent Office's approach to 360° feedback had a wide range of assistance built into it for participants to make active (developmental) use of their feedback, respondents suggested that the role of that support network was not visible. There was no reminder mechanism in the system that kicked in, if follow-up action was not taken by the individual. Despite this, the research did reveal some instances where further support had led to positive outcomes, for example, two interviewees noted how discussions with their managers about their feedback had resulted in job-shadowing opportunities. Another had found discussing the feedback with an external consultant of particular value in devising their development plan. But comments from the majority of participants indicated that they viewed the process as a largely isolated act, suggesting there is a clear gap between policy and practice.

In a similar vein, 14 respondents reported not speaking at all with their manager about the feedback, and only eight questionnaire respondents agreed that they "have received support in taking development action following the feedback". One interviewee commented:

I was quite happy to forget about it after as there was nowhere I could take it . . . after I had my results, my manager never asked me what they were, and I never told [my manager].

Finally, it was interesting to learn from two participants that they found the interview part of this research helpful in reflecting on their feedback:

if we hadn't had this chat, and somebody had asked me . . . "what did you think of 360° feedback?" . . . I probably would have turned round and said it was a load of rubbish . . . but now I've had an opportunity to actually sit down and think about it . . . I think it probably has done me some good . . .

This finding corresponds with the fact that some participants had appealed for an additional debriefing session to be built into the 360° process, believing that a longer or additional session with the occupational psychologist would add value.

Discussion of findings

The findings from the interviews and questionnaires are perhaps most significant in their mixed implications and interrelationships with the literature. In relation to the link between the 360° feedback system put in place in the Patent Office and its other HRM policies, the key finding is that there is a mismatch between what the board

members perceive to be the role of the system and what participants perceive to be the role of 360°. Specifically, better working relations and culture change reflect an organisational agenda, whereas the respondents viewed 360° feedback as associated with individual improvement, with the onus for follow-up action very much left to the individuals involved.

As noted earlier whilst it is not uncommon for management development initiatives to focus on creating cultural change (Storey and Sisson, 1993) the literature reveals mixed views on whether 360° feedback is able to contribute to culture change or whether the culture has to be the right one before the feedback process can be made to work effectively (Chivers and Darling, 1999; IRS, 2000). More importantly, if senior management in the Patent Office are utilising the 360° feedback programme as a catalyst for change, then they should be mindful of Iles' (2001) argument that 360° feedback is considered to be most suitable for flat structures where employees are involved and teamwork exists. The implication is that the particular culture and hierarchical nature of the civil service provides a considerable challenge for the successful introduction of the 360° process, let alone its success in affecting change.

The Patent Office's use of 360° feedback as a development rather than appraisal process places the approach taken firmly within the "soft" version of HRM (Armstrong, 2001; Beer *et al.*, 1984). This framework emphasises that the way human resources are managed impacts on the competitiveness of the organisation and proposes that HRM policies should be aligned with corporate strategy. In this way, it may positively influence employee competence and commitment to ensure the long-term effectiveness of the organisation. Indeed, in taking this approach the organisation appears to conform to the advice in the literature about not creating direct links to pay or appraisal, at least in the early stages (Fletcher, 1997, 2001). However, by not making an explicit and direct link to performance, the introduction of the process may have missed the overall objective of improving management performance.

Given the problems that the Patent Office had with the previous feedback system (LAMP), it would seem vital to avoid any potential controversy with the new system. Yet further action may be needed at the Patent Office to ensure 360° feedback does not suffer the same fate as the traditional appraisal system as well as the earlier LAMP initiative. It was recognised by the Board that the current system of appraisal has a number of weaknesses, but some participants were concerned that 360° feedback was also open to problems in that the anonymity of 360° feedback may be seen as an "opportunity to tell staff what they really thought of them". Such a view expressed in a 360° setting may not necessarily be the same view that might be expressed during the more traditional appraisal process. Achieving consistency in feedback to enable effective development to take place was a major concern.

In addition, there may be some difficulties with managers understanding the behaviours or competencies they are expected to display. To illustrate the problem, the DRM is based on the Patent Office competencies, and identifies appropriate activities to develop these. In contrast, the 360° feedback questionnaire uses the senior civil service competencies. Although there are some points of convergence, these are unrelated documents, and it could be difficult for managers to reconcile the two criteria when planning their development.

There was also recognition among key informants that the existing policy concerning 360° feedback is not yet sufficiently aligned with other aspects of human

resource policy. It is clear that more thought is required as to exactly what the organisation expects the process to deliver and how it might fit with other aspects of management development activities. However, the organisation is not unusual in adopting 360° feedback without a clear understanding of how it will be aligned with other aspects of human resource policy, as the normative literature prefers (Armstrong, 2001).

In relation to the assessment of the 360° feedback process by participants, the results indicate that the participants generally found the overall experience a positive one. This is important given evidence that an individual's perceptions can impact on the action they take following the feedback. Given this potential for negative reaction, retaining the current voluntary nature of the process may be preferable, although this could potentially mean that those most in need of developing their self-awareness would avoid it (Handy *et al.*, 1996). Following McCauley and Moxley's (1996) note that managers tend to gravitate towards particular forms of feedback at particular stages in their careers, the system as enacted suggests that in allowing freedom to choose the timing, the Patent Office may ensure its managers are more receptive to the process when they do follow it. In addition, evidence suggests participants may become more positive over time if the process is used effectively. Waldman and Bowen (1998) conclude that at least two cycles of 360° feedback must be allowed before increased support becomes apparent and that for managers to tolerate the process, they must be in a position where they can actually address the feedback.

Interestingly, as Mabey (2001) notes in contrast to assumptions made by other commentators, some of the Patent Office participants suggested the process would gain more if it was not anonymous, as then their accountability to take action would be increased. Also unlike other research, none of the participants reported that they felt the 360° process was a "threat". This could arguably be a public sector peculiarity, with civil servants being afforded greater checks and balances on managerial prerogative. It is also important to note that these individuals were largely handpicked and may have been generally positive about development opportunities. Indeed, some interviewees noted that they anticipated other managers might try to avoid the process because of the perceived threat. However, it seems evident that unless management can put in place a system of support and review, the fallout or non-completion rate will remain high and the benefits gained by the few may be lost amongst the dissenting voices of the majority.

On the theme of self-awareness, the findings of this research correspond with Mabey's (2001, p. 47) study, with a number of individuals claiming their self-awareness had not been particularly raised. Although further probing revealed some areas where the individual had learned something additional about how others perceived them, it seems that the normative description, which claims that the power of the process stems from raising self-awareness, is not universally applicable. Instead, the feedback appeared to reaffirm development needs and prompted the consideration of some action.

Hazucha *et al.*'s (1993) findings indicate that 360° feedback is effective for management development. Their research suggests that the post-feedback development activities associated with management skill development were those most requiring follow-up action beyond the initial feedback review, but that these were the least consistently used. Follow-up action at the Patent Office was inconsistent and

utilising Hazucha *et al.*'s findings, this might explain why some respondents perceived the feedback had not particularly influenced their development as managers. As Garavan *et al.* (1997, p. 142) argue:

The myth that feedback is sufficient for development to take place must be dispelled. Follow through means ongoing effort on the recipient's part and on the part of anyone assisting that person.

In the design of the 360° feedback process the organisation had introduced a specific mechanism for disseminating feedback, which included a meeting with an occupational psychologist. The purpose of this meeting was to help individuals understand their feedback and consider their action plan. It was also expected that individuals would use the feedback to inform their PAP and discuss this with their line manager. Extensive training facilities are also available through the training and development unit, with training managers available to offer advice and support upon request. This suggests a reactive, static support system the role and function of which require further consideration by the organisation. In particular the organisation needs to take into account that it may simply not be within either the organisational culture or human nature to seek the type of support available because it may be seen as an admission of weakness.

The usually proactive nature of the training and development function within the Patent Office may also have led participants to assume that something would be done for them, and so may have actually encouraged participants not to take direct action for themselves. Indeed, a previous Investors in People accreditation process recognised the strength of the Training and Development Unit in the Patent Office, but suggested that care was needed to avoid individuals becoming complacent and abdicating responsibility for developing themselves and their staff.

Limited developmental outcomes might also have arisen because the findings identified that there was an inconsistent level of discussion between participants and their managers, and limited integration of the feedback into individual action plans. This may have resulted in some participants feeling no sense of accountability to use their feedback. Or, as London *et al.* (1997, pp. 163-4) note:

Multi-source feedback can be easy to ignore and may not prompt recipients to set performance improvement goals, especially when the feedback is solely for the recipients' development and has no material consequences. This may occur even when recipients report finding the feedback useful.

Therefore, while the normative literature suggests that participants will be motivated by the feedback to make improvements (Ward, 1997), the reality in the organisation, as Brutus *et al.* (1998, p. 27) report is that "without systematic planning and some sort of support system, performance improvement efforts will be lost in the grind of daily activities".

While the notions of personal responsibility for ones career and self-development are widely accepted (Walton, 1999), some participants of the 360° feedback process in the Patent Office clearly required more support following their feedback than the approach adopted would suggest. There was certainly a feeling from some interviewees that the feedback was "the development event" (McCauley and Moxley, 1996, p. 18), and they were left waiting for somebody else to take some action, or for something else to happen.

Conclusions

This paper explored the introduction of 360° feedback at the Patent Office through three themes of the research data: first, the organisation's rationale for the introduction of 360° feedback, second the strategic alignment of 360° feedback and third, participants' perceptions of its value.

The rationale behind the introduction of 360° feedback in the Patent Office was found to be both reflective of a larger reform movement within the civil service and indicative of a specific concern for managerial responsiveness and effectiveness within the organisation itself. The wider trend towards the adoption of 360° feedback is based on an assumed relationship between knowledge of stakeholder perceptions and a worker's, or more specifically a manager's level of performance. The extension of this argument is an assumption that measuring performance may lead to improvement but as we have seen one does not necessarily follow the other without some other form of organisation based intervention. Because of its location at the soft/developmental end of the performance management literature, 360° feedback is often associated with training and development. This is evident in the experience of the Patent Office in that the term "performance appraisal" is manifestly absent, even though there is a clear relationship.

In terms of the organisation's decision to introduce 360° feedback an overarching concern was that, because of an earlier voluntary approach to management development, the take up of development opportunities was ad hoc and variable. The introduction of 360° feedback was considered to be one component of a new management development initiative aimed at capturing an increasing number of manager level participants through a process aimed specifically at constructively identifying needs. However, because of the reactive role adopted by the training and development function there was little take up in terms of their action plans, or then following this through with supporting training and development action. Furthermore, the role that line managers are expected to play in staff development by providing feedback and effective communication, so that employees are aware of their own organisational contribution, did not occur for a significant number. Ten of the group had not discussed their feedback with their managers.

It was clear from the research that despite the normative expectations established in much of the existing literature, participants' experiences of the introduction of the 360° feedback system was more subtle than simply gaining a broader understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. This research indicates that the impact of the experience was influenced by a range of counter-intuitive factors. First, there was a clear indication that most participants in the Patent Office did not feel threatened or the accompanying need to influence raters. They accepted the feedback as largely accurate but some resented the fact that the veil of anonymity was being used to make statements that they felt should have been drawn to their attention previously.

Another significant finding was the perception that the feedback did not raise self-awareness for many participants because what was being said was largely "nothing new". Such findings reinforce Mabey's (2001) analysis that suggests the power of 360° feedback may not necessarily raise awareness. Instead it may reinforce participants' understanding of the need to improve and encourage them to modify weaknesses that they are already aware of.

In terms of the perceived organisational process impact, participants noted some clear areas for further consideration. First, there was a degree of mismatch between the

instrument being used and both the organisational base-line competencies and the process of personal development planning. While this lack of horizontal integration in the human resource management systems of the Patent Office is small in scale, it may result in the communication of a confused message about management expectations. More specifically, in choosing to leave the 360° feedback system outside of the performance appraisal and reward structures, the Patent Office is following a specific philosophical path that emphasises humanistic development, however, more work needs to be done in closing the development “loop”. The system as piloted relies heavily on development plans and corrective action being undertaken through participant led initiative but many participants took no such actions as they apparently expected the organisation’s HRM systems to undertake this planning for them. Given the apparent inaction in the majority of cases, there either needs to be a re-education or realignment of participants’ expectations or a redesign in the organisations systems to ensure that the outcomes of the 360° feedback process actually bear fruit.

The data shows that the purpose of the 360° feedback scheme as presented is not actually “to help individuals to understand their feedback and develop actions”, it is an attempt to make an impact on the organisation in terms of culture change. The organisational problem that emerges is that it seems not to have been explicitly thought through. It is therefore likely to compound problems of performance, thereby sustaining ineffective HRM related practices. If the apparent rationale for the Patent Office’s adoption of 360° feedback is correct, and managerial flexibility is key to long-term adaptation in an increasingly challenging environment, then the need for a closing of the loop and ensuring that development and culture change are linked, is imperative. However, on its own this still may not be sufficient and there is considerable work to be undertaken in ensuring that other organisational processes and procedures are sympathetically aligned and integrated.

The development of 360° feedback in the Patent Office is likely to be unproblematic at an operational level as it is widely accepted by those who have taken part in it so far. It is favoured over previous forms of performance management, even though they are not necessarily referred to as such. However, the modernisation of the public sector and the extension of the new public management philosophy embodied in the 360° feedback system may have dramatic implications. By codifying the outcomes of the employment relationship into “measurable”, “transparent”, “objectified” aspects, the traditional negotiated “space” in the employment relationships in the public sector will be compressed and a very different form of psychological contract will be developed in this sector. Perhaps a more thoughtful approach, embarked upon now, when the introduction of processes such as 360° feedback are in their infancy will be capable of producing long-term benefits in this psychological relationship.

Note

1. Broken down as 3 per cent senior managers; 12 per cent middle managers; 20 per cent junior managers/supervisors; and 38 per cent administrative staff.

References

- Antonioni, D. and Park, H. (2001), “The relationship between rater affect and three sources of 360° feedback ratings”, *Journal of Management*, Vol. 27, pp. 479-95.
- Armstrong, M. (2001), *A Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice*, 8th ed., Kogan Page, London.

-
- Armstrong, M. and Baron, A. (1998), *Performance Management: The New Realities*, Institute of Personnel and Development, London.
- Atwater, L.E., Waldman, D.A. and Brett, J.F. (2002), "Understanding and optimising multisource feedback", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 193-208.
- Bach, S. (2000), "From performance appraisal to performance management", in Bach, S. and Sisson, K. (Eds), *Personnel Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., Blackwell Business, Oxford, pp. 241-63.
- Bach, S. and Della Rocca, G. (2000), "The management strategies of public service employers in Europe", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 82-97.
- Beer, M., Spector, B., Lawrence, P.R., Quinn Mills, D. and Walton, R.E. (1984), *Managing Human Assets*, The Free Press, New York, NY.
- Bracken, D.W., Timmreck, C.W., Fleenor, J.W. and Summers, L. (2001), "360 feedback from another angle", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 3-20.
- Brutus, S., Fleenor, J.W. and London, M. (1998), "Elements of effective 360° feedback", in Tornow, W.W., London, M. and CCL Associates (Eds), *Maximising the Value of 360° Feedback: A Process for Successful Individual and Organisational Development*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA, pp. 11-27.
- Brutus, S., London, M. and Martineau, J. (1999), "The impact of 360° feedback on planning for career development", *The Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 18 No. 8, pp. 676-93.
- Cabinet Office (1999), Setting the Agenda for the Civil Service of the Future, Press Release, CAB 307/99, 15 December 1999 (online), available at: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/news/1999/991215_civilservice.asp (accessed 21 August 2003).
- Cabinet Office (2004a), "Delivery and reform online", available at: www.civil-service.gov.uk/reform/about_delivery/about_delivery.asp (accessed 1 June 2004).
- Cabinet Office (2004b), "Performance management. Civil service performance and reward division", available at: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/civilservice/performanceandreward/performance.htm (accessed 1 June 2004).
- Chivers, W. and Darling, P. (1999), *360° Feedback and Organisational Culture*, Institute of Personnel Department, London.
- Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997), *The Managerial State. Power, Politics and Ideology in the Remaking of Social Welfare*, Sage, London.
- Clarke, J., Gewirtz, S. and McLaughlin, E. (Eds) (2000), *New Managerialism, New Welfare?*, Sage, London.
- DeNisi, A.S. and Kluger, A.N. (2000), "Feedback effectiveness: can 360° appraisals be improved?", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 129-39.
- Fletcher, C. (1997), *Appraisal: Routes to Improved Performance*, 2nd ed., Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, London.
- Fletcher, C. (2001), "Performance Appraisal and Management: The developing research agenda", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 74, pp. 473-487.
- Fletcher, C. and Baldry, C. (2000), "A study of individual differences and self-awareness in the context of multi-source feedback", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 73, pp. 303-19.
- Garavan, T.N., Morley, M. and Flynn, M. (1997), "360 degree feedback: its role in employee development", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 134-47.
- Geake, A. and Gray, A. (2001), "360° feedback: how was it for you?", *Selection and Development Review*, Vol. 17 No. 44, pp. 3-6.

- Handy, L., Devine, M. and Heath, L. (1996), *360° Feedback: Unguided Missile or Powerful Weapon?*, Ashridge Management Research Group, Berkhamstead.
- Hazucha, J.F., Hexlett, S.A. and Schneider, R.J. (1993), "The impact of 360° feedback on management skills development", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 32 Nos 2/3, pp. 325-51.
- Hussey, J. and Hussey, R. (1997), *Business Research*, Macmillan Press Ltd, Basingstoke.
- Iles, P. (2001), "Employee resourcing", in Storey, J. (Ed.), *Human Resource Management: A Critical Text*, 2nd ed., Thomson Learning, London, pp. 133-64.
- IRS Employment Trends (2000), "A rounded view", *IRS Employment Review*, Vol. 705, pp. 5-9.
- Kaboolian, L. (1998), "The new public management: challenging the boundaries of the management vs administration debate", *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 58 No. 3, pp. 189-93.
- Kanouse, D. (1998), "Why multi-rater feedback systems fail", *HR Focus*, January, p. 3.
- London, M., Smither, J.W. and Adsit, D.J. (1997), "Accountability: the achilles' heel of multisource feedback", *Group and Organisation Management*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 162-84.
- McCarthy, A.M. and Garavan, T.N. (1999), "Developing self-awareness in the managerial career development process: the value of 360° feedback and the MBTI", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, Vol. 23 No. 9, pp. 437-45.
- McCauley, C.D. and Moxley, R.S. (1996), "Developmental 360: how feedback can make managers more effective", *Career Development International*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 15-19.
- Mabey, C. (2001), "Closing the circle: participant views of a 360 degree feedback programme", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 41-53.
- Moore, S. (2000), "Whitehall's home grown moderniser", *Public Service Magazine*, February, pp. 14-17.
- Patent Office (2003), *Corporate Plan 2003*, Patent Office, Newport.
- Patent Office (2004), "About us and policies", available at: www.patent.gov.uk/about/whowhere/people.htm (accessed 1 June 2004).
- Patton, M.Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed., Sage, London.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2003), *Research Methods for Business Students Third Edition*, Pearson Education.
- Storey, J. and Sisson, K. (1993), *Managing Human Resources and Industrial Relations*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Townley, B. (1993), "Foucault power/knowledge and its relevance for human resource management", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 518-45.
- Waldman, D.A. and Bowen, D.E. (1998), "The acceptability of 360 degree appraisals: a customer-supplier relationship perspective", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 117-29.
- Walton, J. (1999), *Strategic Human Resource Development*, Financial Times Prentice-Hall, Essex.
- Ward, P. (1997), *360° Feedback*, Institute of Personnel and Development, London.