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Adnan Jawabri [α], Rouhi Faisal [σ] & Maitha Al Baloushi [ρ]

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I. Introduction

The attainment of organizational goals is not dependent on the formulation, implementation and execution of strategy alone. It also depends on the evaluation of the way that the strategy is implemented and then executed in order to decide on the approach that fits organizational needs the best. Performance management of employees forms an important part of the evaluation of strategy effectiveness. Performance management is an HR function that is focused on creating a work environment that aims at empowering employees to use their knowledge, talents and skills to work to the best of their abilities and attain organizational goals (Kibichii, Kiptum, & Chege, 2016). On the other hand, employee productivity is measured on the dimensions of employees' efficiency and effectiveness in achieving organizational goals (Bhatti & Qureshi, 2007). Many studies conducted in the field suggest that these two variables are interlinked (Fletcher, 2002).

This study aims at ascertaining the findings of previous research by analyzing the relationship between performance management and employee productivity at Al Ain Zoo located in Abu Dhabi, UAE. This paper adopts a stepwise approach in outlining the research problem, objectives, approach, data collection, discussions and finally recommendations based on the findings of the research.

II. Statement of the Problem

The way that organizations operate in the 21st century, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, has changed dramatically as compared to the 20th century. The traditional performance management approach based on a system of annual appraisal has become outdated in a world where high quality performance is expected from employees on a daily basis (Lock, 2017). This change in the performance management approach is mostly attributable to the fact that the business environment has become highly dynamic and competitive in the recent years. The main goal of any business today, no matter what industry it operates in, is to not just operate profitably in the short run but it is to maintain that profit in the long run through a sustainable competitive advantage. This is where performance management comes in. A business's workforce is one of its biggest assets. In order to use it to the best of its ability, a company's Human Resource department has to come up with a performance management strategy and system that is tailored to the specifically for that particular organization. For instance, the performance management approach used at a bank cannot be applied to manage the performance of the employees at the Al Ain Zoo. Not just this, employee productivity is a direct consequence of performance management. If employees do not get feedback on their performance, then they would continue to perform tasks the way they that they already do, without any aim of improving their productivity.

The problem that this research address is a gap in terms of insufficient literature on the relationship between the two variables, performance management and employee productivity for a zoo. There has been a lot of research on the relationship between the aforementioned variable for a traditional corporation. However, whether that research is applicable to public-centric and non-profit organizations such as zoos and park is yet to be tested.

III. Purpose of the Study

Many organizations, especially those that are run by the government for the public, suffer from a

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variety of institutional and structural weaknesses (Bhatti & Qureshi, 2007). These weaknesses mostly stem from a lack of the organization's interest in determining the underlying causes as a result of the amount of time and effort required. The purpose of this study is test the relationship between performance management and employee productivity at Al Ain Zoo in order to help its management overcome any institutional failure that it might be facing at the moment. By testing this relationship, this study outlines whether an organization such as a zoo should be using the traditional performance management approach. Not just this, it will also help the management at Al Ain Zoo in enhancing employee productivity by highlighting the areas of improvement in its appraisal system as well as the general accepted employee practices that should be corrected.

IV. Research Question

The main research question for this study is:

What is the impact of performance management on employee productivity at Al Ain Zoo?

In order to gain a deeper insight, some subsidiary questions for the research include the following:

- What kind of performance management approach is used for Al Ain Zoo?
- Is there a difference between the performance management strategy for a zoo and a traditional 'corporate' business?
- How is employee productivity measured at Al Ain Zoo?
- Is the overall employee productivity at Al Ain Zoo considered satisfactory?
- Has there been a change in the way that employee performance is managed at the Al Ain Zoo after the Covid-19 pandemic?

V. Hypothesis of the Study

Based on the two variables performance management and employee productivity, this research focuses on the testing and evaluation of the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a strong positive relation between performance management and employee productivity at Al Ain Zoo.

H2: The performance management approach for a zoo is different from a traditional 'corporate' business.

a) Target Audience

The primary target audience of this research is the management of Al Ain Zoo. The zoo's management will benefit from this research by using its findings to further improve their performance management system. Not just this, since the research is also going to outline other factors which the employees at the zoo think impact employee productivity, it will provide a clearer picture of other effective practices that could be used to improve employee productivity.

Other zoos and similar public service companies also make up the target audience for this research, but in a secondary capacity, since its findings can be indirectly applied to improve performance management and employee productivity at these organizations.

b) Arrangement and Approach of Study

The underlying research is exploratory in nature as it is conducted to explore the relationship between two variables. It is a primary research that is based on a qualitative interview approach. Since the study is related to Human Resource Management, employees of the HR department at the Al Ain Zoo were interviewed. In total, three interviews were conducted. These were of the HR Manager, to gain an overall understanding of HR operations at Al Ain Zoo; Employee Analytics Coordinator, to gain specified insight on Al Ain Zoo's performance management strategy and its implementation and an ordinary employee working in the finance department as a financial analyst, to get an employee perspective related to Al Ain's performance management approach. The data obtained through these interviews is then qualitatively analyzed in order test the research hypotheses.

c) Study Limitations

Some limitations for this study include:

- Although the results can be used for other similar organizations, they are 100% true and applicable only for Al Ain Zoo.
- The research is based on three interviews only as a result of time-constraints.
- The interviews were conducted as a result of the pandemic due to which the number of follow-up questions and extra information extraction was limited.

VI. Methodology of Research

As already discussed, this research is a primary research. It is based on a qualitative approach of data collection, i.e. interviews. A qualitative approach is effective when a researcher is investigating a relatively focused or 'niche' area (Jamshed, 2014). Since this research is focused on the relationship between two performance management and employee productivity specifically for Al Ain Zoo, the use of this methodology is justified. In addition to this, certain questions cannot be answered and themes cannot be identified using the quantitative approach (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). In such cases, interviews are used to collect raw data in the form of qualitative responses which are then analyzed to infer results. For this research, open ended questions like the description Al Ain Zoo's performance

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management strategy were important, hence interviews were conducted.

All three interviews were conducted online on March 15, 2020 using zoom. The interviews were based on the same 15 questions for all three personnel, although, there were some alterations depending on the post of the employee. The research analyzes the data collected through these interviews by dividing it into themes and drives results using subjective analysis based on the nature of the identified themes.

a) Corporate Description

Al Ain Zoo was established in 1968 by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Nahyan. It is the largest and the only zoo of its kind in the Middle East. It was established by Sheikh Zayed as a center of the Middle Eastern history, culture and heritage to strengthen the affiliation of Emiratis with their country. The zoo also aims at promoting tourism, development and environmental conservation in the region. It not only serves as a sanctuary for some endangered species of animals but it also promotes education and learning by supporting academic communities in the region. Currently, the zoo houses over 4000 animals across 200 different species which helps them provide visitors with an ultimate wildlife experience (Al Ain Zoo, 2021).

The Organization's Activities

Al Ain Zoo is engaged in three kinds of activities, namely: wildlife conservation, wildlife partnerships and wildlife research (Al Ain Zoo, 2021). The first and probably the most important activity of the zoo is to provide wild animals with a habitat that allows them to live freely, especially those that belong to endangered species. According to IUCN classification, almost 25% of the world's endangered species are housed at the Al Ain Zoo (Al Ain Zoo, 2021). Secondly, the zoo actively sets-up strategic partnerships with associations and conservation agencies from across the world to supplement its first activity: conservation. As a part of this second activity, Al Ain Zoo has been a longstanding member of organizations and committees such as the World Association of Zoos and Aquaria, Sahara Conservation Fund and the World Conservation Union and Species Survival Commission to name a few(Al Ain Zoo, 2021). As a part of its third function, research, the zoo has dedicated education and research programs that are focused on conducting research in areas such as the survival of endangered species or how to best conserve natural habitats for animals in order to reduce the incidence of specie endangerment. Some of the endangered animals present at the zoo include the Egyptian Vulture, the Saker Falcon and the Desert Oryx. As a result of its pioneering research, Al Ain Zoo has been successful in attaining a reputation for leadership and excellence in the international wildlife conservation community.

Strategic Management

Some parts of Al Ain Zoo's corporate strategy are discussed below (Al Ain Zoo, 2021):

Vision

A world in harmony with wildlife.

Mission

To deliver to wildlife conservation through research, animal welfare, awareness, and positive behavior towards biodiversity

Core Values

- Enabling
- Sustainability
- Teamwork
- Professionalism
- Accountability and Initiative

Staff and Organizational Chart

Al Ain Zoo currently hires 532 employees (ZoomInfo Technologies LLC, 2021). The zoo uses a strategy based on balancing the past and the future for training its employees for providing visitors with an authentic 21st century wildlife experience. The zoo's staff, that represents it in front of visitors, consists of guides, cadres and highly skilled zoologists.

The researcher is currently working as an HR intern at the zoo. Other departments of that offer an internship opportunity at the zoo include: animal care, animal conservation, guest services, general services, marketing, corporate communication and zoo events. The head of the company at Al Ain Zoo holds the seat of Director of the Zoo instead of CEO since it is not a traditional, for-profit corporation. It is a government run organization. Even though there is no well-defined chart available for Al Ain Zoo's organizational hierarchy, the following chart provides a close representation:

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Figure 1: Al Ain Zoo Organizational Chart

Business and Functional Strategies

A business strategy is a formal way of defining a company's goals and outlining the approach that the company's management and employees adopts in achieving these goals (White, 1986). On the other hand, a functional strategy is similar but is more focused on attaining and maintaining a competitive advantage (Sharma & Fisher, 1997). The business and functional strategies of Al Ain Zoo as a corporation are based on the following priorities:

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- Conservation of endangered species of animals
- Preservation of environment
- An aim to become an ultimate entertainment and recreational experience for families and wildlife enthusiasts
- Consistent updating of business practices to incorporate technology in operations so that the zoo is able to compete in the international markets
- To maintain low operational costs, especially after the hit that the Zoo has taken in its profitability as a result of last year's Global Lockdown.

Current Projects Undertaking

Al Ain Zoo uses a business strategy that is based on 'continuous development' (Al Ain Zoo, 2021). The zoo is constantly launching new and increasingly creative initiatives such as its 'walking for the environment' initiative, working to diversify its operations by increasing the number of its tours as well as expanding engagement activities and wildlife attractions. Some of the Al Ain Zoo's current expansion projects include: the elephant safari, the gorilla sanctuary, a reptile park, a koala land, a nature reserve for over 400 endangered species, a chimpanzee forest, a sand cat breeding center, a sand cat conservation center, a penguin beach, a rescue center, an aquarium and a dedicated event pavilion for largescale wildlife events and programs(Al Ain Zoo, 2021).

b) Industry Analysis

According to the World Conservation Union (IUCN), in the last three centuries zoos have gone through a complete transformation from being wildlife menageries in the 19th century to museums of living animals in the 20th century to finally being conservatories in the 21st century. The zoo industry in the Gulf region is not as competitive as it is around the globe as a result of high barriers to entry. In UAE, three main zoos have been established. All three of these zoos operate under the government of the UAE. These zoos are:

- Al Ain Zoo
- Emirates Zoo
- Dubai Zoo

Among these three zoos, the Al Ain Zoo is the biggest and the most advanced one. It is the largest zoo in the UAE that covers an area of 770 hectares as compared to only 2 hectares' area of Dubai Zoo (Fernandes, 2020). The Al Ain Zoo has successfully positioned itself in the international market as a wildlife research and conservation organization rather than just a 'commercial' zoo like the other two zoos of the region. Another factor worth mentioning is that Al Ain Zoo has been able to stand out as a zoo and a wildlife conservation organization as a result of using 21st century technologies. In 2020, the zoo incorporated the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for identifying animals, especially Arabian Sand Cats, to provide the highest standard of animal welfare services to endangered species (Geronimo, 2020). This puts the zoo leaps and bounds ahead of the other two zoos in terms of industrial competition.

Porter's Five Force Analysis

The five force model was first proposed by Michael E. Porter and published in the Harvard Business Review in 1979. It is a model that is used to analyzes a firm's external microenvironment in order to give the business a strategic direction (Bruijl, 2018). In order to get a clearer picture of the competitive landscape, the following text conducts a Porter's Five Force Analysis for the UAE's zoo industry.

Threat of New Entrants

The threat of new entrants in the industry is related to how high or low the barriers of entry are for the specific industry. In case of the UAE's zoo industry, the threat of new entrants is very low. This is because of numerous reasons. One of these reasons is the fact that the UAE's government maintains a high level of regulation when it comes to wildlife trade and commercialization. The country was among the first few Middle Eastern countries to ban the possession and trade of wild animals by the local population in 2016(BBC, 2017). Another factor that contributes to barriers being extremely high is the fact that the initial capital requirement to set up a zoo that could compete with the three government-run zoos that have been mentioned is extremely high. Even if a potential entrepreneur in the industry did everything by the book and had the necessary capital to set up a profitable business, they would face other problems such as having a trusted network of wildlife suppliers, high working-capital requirements, consistent monitoring by the government etc. (Varelas & Georgopoulos, 2017) all of which combined would make running the business very difficult

Threat of Substitutes

The threat of substitutes for Al Ain Zoo is low. This is because of the fact that the zoo is consistently engaged in improving its operations through the use of modern technology. This is not a common practice in the industry and therefore, it gives the zoo a strong advantage over existing and potential competitors. Not just this, since the zoo is engaged in research work in fields that have not previously been explored, its contribution to the wildlife conservation society cannot be substituted.

Bargaining Power of Suppliers

The suppliers for a zoo can be divided into two categories. These are: the suppliers of animals which are essentially other zoos or conservative parks and the government of the UAE which regulates the zoo. The bargaining power of suppliers for Al Ain Zoo is high. This is because zoos are legally not allowed to capture animals from the wild. As a result, in order to bring in

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new animals, the zoo sometimes has to pay whatever price their supplier asks. As for the government, it can pass any regulation in relation to wildlife law in the country. This too renders the zoo helpless in terms of authority.

Bargaining Power of Customers

The bargaining power of customers for Al Ain Zoo is comparatively low. This is due to the fact that the zoo is funded by the government of the UAE and therefore, does not entirely depend on its own revenue. The entry ticket for the zoo costs only AED 30 which is relatively affordable for all. Not just this, the zoo has positioned itself as a research center as well. This means that it is not merely a 'commercial' zoo. Due to lack of the zoo's dependence on its visitors for remaining operational, the customers have low bargaining power.

Competitive Rivalry

The zoo industry in the UAE is not competitive at all. It only consists of three main zoos all of which are backed by the government, are located in separate regions and have different operational goals and strategies. Since Al Ain Zoo's main focus is on the conservation of wildlife in the region and research on it, there is not much rivalry between it and the other two zoos which are more commercialized.

VII. Research Results and Data Collection

a) Organizational Analysis

This research focuses on the HRM function of performance management at the Al Ain Zoo and its impact on employee productivity. The two main areas addressed by this research are explained below:

Performance Management System Used at Al Ain Zoo

Al Ain Zoo uses a bespoke online performance management system on an organizational scale. This system is called PABLO. It is a popular performance appraisal system that is used by zoos across the world (Consultancy, 2021). The details of how this system operates are elaborated in the discussion section.

Effectiveness of Performance Appraisal Techniques used at Al Ain Zoo

The second theme that this research explores for the Al Ain Zoo is the effectiveness of its HR's performance appraisal system based on evaluating the relationship between the zoo's performance management approach and employee productivity. The results of this analysis are also mentioned in the discussions section.

b) Data Collection

This research is based on the collection and analysis of primary data. The relevant information for data collection is discussed below.

Interview Sampling

As already discussed, three interviews were conducted for this study. Qualitative methods of data collection, such as an interview are usually based on fewer responses as compared to other methods such as survey questionnaires. This is because such researches are conducted on the basis of highly specific data that cannot be generalized into close ended questions(Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The decision to conduct three interviews was based on the rationale of collecting data from employees working at all three tiers of the organization. The HR manager provided a managerial perspective on performance management, the employee analytics coordinator provided a specialist perspective on performance management whereas the finance department employee provided an employee perspective on management's approach. By comparing these three, the gap in perception related to performance management and employee productivity across different tiers of the organization could easily be determined.

c) Qualitative Data Collected

Three interviews based on 15 questions were conducted online via Zoom to collect qualitative data. This means that the data that was collected could not be coded into numbers which further implies that this research is not based on statistical analysis. In order to address this gap, the research instead uses the thematic analysis approach that is based on the identification of patterns in the collected data and its conversion into information by interpreting it (Clarke & Braun, 2014). The major themes are identified and discussed in the next section.

VIII. Discussions

a) Thematic Analysis

The researcher identified the following themes against questions that were asked during the interviews:

1. Method of performance management done at Al Ain Zoo

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator/Financial Analyst:

Al Ain Zoo uses the software called PABLO as the performance appraisal system of its choice. This is a performance management system that is produced by Marshall E-Learning Consultancy. It is an online performance appraisal system that falls in line with the zoo's high technology integration approach. This system is based on a 'self-driven' approach that enables employees to develop their own careers by allowing each employee to draft his or her initial career objectives and outline their learning and development needs. Since the company has only about 500 employees, each employee is specifically evaluated by their line manager who also outlines the areas of improvement that they have observed for the employee. The performance

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management system them combines the feedback of the two in order to develop an employee management strategy that is specifically tailored to the need of a particular employee. This kind of an appraisal is an every-day activity at the zoo. In addition to this, annual performance appraisals are also conducted.

2. Measurement of performance management at Al Ain Zoo

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator:

Performance is measured mostly in terms of the achievement of individual objectives that the employees are required to enter into PABLO as well as the attainment of organizational goals against deadlines and targets.

3. Frequency of Feedback in an informal capacity

HR Manager:

It depends on the department that the employee works in. For instance, for tour guides, the frequency of informal, feedback from superiors of all departments is high. However, for someone working in the IT department, informal feedback is very rarely given because of that department's work being capital intensive and high-stake.

Financial Analyst:

The frequency of informal feedback for an employee working in the finance department ranges from low to medium. This is because the job I mostly number-related and all of the goals and objectives are clearly outlined in the form of statics so it becomes very easy for all employees to gauge whether the goals are being met or not.

4. Frequency of Formal Appraisals

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator/ Financial Analyst:

Formal Appraisals are conducted on a day-to-day basis with the employees being encouraged to use the company's performance management software to keep in touch with their individual career goals and communicate them with their managers. In this kind of appraisal, the HR department may or may not be involved. It is a more intimate approach between a line manager and their subordinates. On the other hand, the HR department also conducts the traditional annual appraisal that measures employee performance based on work hours, goal attainment and active participation.

5. Impact of performance management strategy on employee productivity

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator/ Financial Analyst:

All three interviews indicated that the performance management approach of Al Ain Zoo's management has a strong positive impact on employee productivity. The financial analyst reported that the approach used by the management leads to motivation and high levels of participation among the employees.

6. Past trends/improvement in performance management at Al Ain Zoo

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator:

The zoo has only recently introduced the use of PABLO. Previously, it was using an HR-centric approach that did not provide employees with the opportunity to self-appraise.

7. Rewarding good performance

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator/ Financial Analyst:

Good performance is awarded in the form of annual bonuses and monthly commissions to employees on an organizational level. In addition to this, researchers and scientists are also given grants depending on their performance.

8. Corrective measures against poor performance

HR Manager/Employee Analytics Coordinator/ Financial Analyst:

For the day-to-day appraisal using PABLO, informal communication may allow line managers and employees to take corrective action against poor performance and productivity. As for annual appraisals, employees performing below a certain level for two consecutive years are let-go in order to maintain a certain performance level at the zoo.

9. Overall productivity of employees at Al Ain Zoo

HR Manager:

The manager reported that there was room for improvement in the zoo's overall employee productivity, especially in corporate departments such as IT and finance.

Financial Analyst:

The overall employee productivity was reported to be satisfactory from an employee's perspective. The employee reported to have worked in the corporate sector prior to Al Ain Zoo and stated that the zoo's management compares the performance of administrative departments with field and research departments. In the employee's opinion, this was an unfair comparison since the departments have no common operations.

10. Management's openness towards employee suggestions

HR Manager:

The management considers itself to be fairly open to suggestions from employees which has resulted in an empowering work environment for the organization.

Financial Analyst:

Even though the management is open to suggestions, decision-making is still very much centralized. It results in feelings of mistrust among the employees after momentarily empowering them.

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11. Other factors that impact employee productivity

HR Manager:

Factors other than performance management that have a positive impact on employee productivity include: job satisfaction, person-organization fit, high-levels of employee participation and high levels of incentivization for good performance.

b) Research Findings

Based on the thematic analysis, both hypotheses of the research are found to be true. There is in fact a strong positive relation between performance management and employee productivity at Al Ain Zoo. The performance management system used by the company has resulted in high levels of employee participation by giving them the opportunity to self-analyze their performance. By giving employees autonomy over their own performance evaluation on a day-to-day basis, employee productivity increases due to high levels of participation, motivation and self-awareness. Not just this, the company's current system brings employees closer to their line managers who are required to individually mentor their subordinates in both, formal and informal, capacities on a regular basis. As a result of this regular evaluation of goals and performance, the deviations from the achievement of organizational objectives are detected in a timely manner. This allows the employees and management to charter a corrective course of action before any strategy has a negative impact on employee productivity.

The second hypothesis that the performance management approach for Al Ain Zoo is different from the traditional annual appraisal system is also proven to be true because the company does use the annual appraisal system for performance management, but it mostly relies on a day-to-day approach for managing employee performance and productivity through PABLO. Not just this, it is an online, real-time appraisal system that operates on providing the best strategy through hybrid inputs: by management as well as employees. This system engages line managers more than the HR department. Thus the hypothesis is proven to be true.

c) Contribution of this Project

This study has addressed the gap of proving the existence of a strong positive relationship between performance management and employee productivity. The managerial implications of this research include its use by the Management of Al Ain Zoo to evaluate the responses of employees whose performance is being managed to further improve the system. This is particularly important since after the Covid-19 pandemic and the global lockdown, the world has gone into a global recession with many people losing their jobs. As a result, anxiety related to job security has been observed in employees across all industries.

d) Recommendations for Further Development

Following recommendations are made to Al Ain Zoo based on the findings of this research:

- Implement a more open system where the management leans towards decentralized decision making slightly more than it presently does
- Analyze the performance of employees belonging to administrative departments on a different scale as compared to filed and research departments
- Reduce anxiety among employees in the post-pandemic era by ensuring them about the security of their job so that their productivity does not suffer in a negative manner.

IX. Conclusions and Lesson Learned

This research has found that a strong positive relationship exists between performance management practices and employee productivity at the Al Ain Zoo. This positive relationship is mainly attributed to the Zoo's use of a non-traditional performance management system that is customized to meet the specific requirements employees working across different departments of the zoo. Not just this, the findings of the research also indicate that this relationship would not have been as strong if the Zoo relied only on the use of the traditional annual appraisal system. Finally, the research also indicates that the perception of management and employees can be different on the same subject matter. As a result, discrepancies exists between what management expects from employees and how they actually perform. It is important for the company to improve its formal and informal communication to overcome these discrepancies so that the achievement of organizational goals does not get lost in translation.

The research imparts a lot of important lessons related to HRM. For starters, it has affirmed the concept that HRM practices cannot be generalized for business operating in different industries. They can be used as a guideline but the key to HRM's effectiveness relies upon the department's customization of its functions to meet the specific needs of the organization.

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