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Developing a framework for assessing effective development activities

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Developing a framework for assessing effective development activities

Abstract

Purpose:

This article compares four different employee activities, namely developmental appraisal, coaching, 360 degree feedback and development centres, offering a comparative framework and an integration of existing research evidence.

Approach:

We propose a unifying classification which combines existing dimensions derived from the literature, such as the degree of formality (e.g. Birdi et al., 1997), with further differences or communalities such as the degree of simulation, ownership of data and frequency of occurrence. This leads us to a review of the pertinent literature and research evidence for each of the four activities discussed, with particular reference to long-term outcomes, their social context as well as individual motivation.

Research and practical implications:

We propose that our classification framework could guide both the implementation and evaluation of diverse activities beyond those reviewed here. We argue that our framework may prove effective in making explicit and thus addressing the potentially conflicting expectations for prevalent activities from different parties involved. We propose that certain aspects of employee development, such as the employer-manager relationship may be more suited to investigation through qualitative paradigms, but that ultimately we also need more evidence for long term outcomes at different levels (e.g. the individual and the organization).

Key words:

Developmental appraisal, coaching, 360 degree feedback, development centres.

Type of paper: literature review

Developing a framework for assessing effective development activities

Introduction to contemporary learning, training and development in organisations

Development, training and resulting learning in organisations are vital to individual and organisational survival. Employees who develop a transferable portfolio of skills stay employable in a competitive market (Maurer *et al.*, 2002). At the organisational level, investment into Human Resource Development [HRD], and in particular investment into training, has been shown to increase productivity and profitability (Huselid, 1995). Historically, two different ways of promoting learning, which we define in line with Warr (2002) as changes in individual knowledge, skill or attitude, have been identified.

On the one hand, formal training is job- or task-specific, with clearly defined objectives (Goldstein, 1993). Sophisticated methodologies have informed the assessment of training needs and the delivery of training, frameworks for evaluation (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 1959) as well as the consideration of individual differences as moderators and mediators (e.g. Colquitt *et al.*, 2000, Kraiger *et al.*, 1993). Learning from training is almost always formal, and mainly based on class-room based activities, although recent trends have pointed to a rise of informal on-the-job training (CIPD, 2007).

On the other hand, employee development refers to a wide range of activities with different purposes and methods, which often transcend a particular job or career and may contain a career-related element (e.g. Birdi *et al.*, 1997). Research on development activities is more fragmented than the training literature and stems from different origins, such as organisational-level HRD orientated approaches (e.g. Thomson *et al.*, 1998), managerial competence (e.g. Boyatzis, 1982), feedback effects (e.g. Ilgen *et al.*, 1979), participation in development activities (e.g. Maurer *et al.*, 2002; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994) or the learning organisation (Senge, 1991). Typical development activities include formal activities which thus elicit formal learning, such as action learning, in-house programmes and qualifications-based education, as

well as informal activities, such as discussions with the line manager (e.g. Birdi *et al.*, 1997) where learning occurs informally. Most, but by no means all, development activities comprise a diagnostic element such as the use of formal ratings. This diagnosis is used to identify individual development needs, which may be addressed as part of a personal development plan [PDP].

As it has been argued that development is central to the advancement of contemporary careers (e.g. Hall, 1996), it is surprising that there is much less evidence available with regard to the validity of various development activities (e.g. Latham & Seijts, 1998), particularly when compared to the vast literature on training. This may be due to methodological difficulties to a) determine clear outcomes for on-going future focused activities, and b) reconcile the potentially differing needs and expectations of the parties involved.

In this article, we investigate the impact of developmental appraisals, coaching, 360 degree feedback and development centres [DC], as these activities are widely adopted in organisations, and their respective differences and communalities provide a springboard for comparison. All of them rely on feedback. However, for 360 degree feedback, DCs, and appraisals this feedback usually also comprises a strong assessment element, whereas coaching may or may not comprise any assessment. Some self-assessment is also core to each of the activities discussed here. In addition, each of these activities is typically employed at different points of the ‘development cycle’ (see Table I). Having provided a framework for comparison, we review pertinent literature to assess their empirical basis with particular reference to long-term outcomes, the social context and individual motivation. We address apparent gaps in the literature, and propose that our framework may guide future research, as well as practice in organizations.

A classification framework for development activities

The examination of research and practice in the domain of employee development requires a framework for the differentiation of various activities. We augment existing classifications, such as the degree of formality, with additional points of reference which we discuss below. To guide the reader, the four activities discussed here have been classified in Table I.

Take in Table I about here

Activities vary by their degree of formality (Birdi et al., 1997; Mumford, 1997; Warr & Birdi, 1998) by which authors typically refer to the degree of structure and formal planning. For our examples, DCs, appraisals and 360 degree feedback are all highly formal as they are pre-planned and based on a priori defined assessment criteria. Coaching can but does not have to be formal, as aims and objectives and indeed the entire purpose depend on what is negotiated in the coaching relationship (Passmore, 2006). Other prevalent activities, such as unplanned discussions with the line manager, mentoring or buddying, are typically even less formal. This has implications for research, as such activities may be difficult to assess due to the lack of clear objectives, procedures or quantifiable outcomes, despite being highly face valid and meaningful to individuals.

Development activities can be distinguished by whether they are required or mandatory (e.g. Birdi et al., 1997; Maurer et al., 2002) which we term organisational expectation,. Participation in mandatory activities, such as appraisals, has implications for motivation. Employees and their managers may not want to partake in this activity but have no choice. In turn, lack of ‘buy in’ and choice in participation may result in unfavourable attitudes towards the process. Indeed, there is ample evidence that mandatory appraisal processes fail to satisfy organizational stakeholders (see Fletcher, 2001). Organizational expectation has direct impact on ownership of ‘data’ or feedback, as information from mandatory activities is more likely to be widely shared thus potentially distorting any performance ratings as people may adjust feedback if they know that this information is not private. In addition, the content is unlikely to be tailored to individual needs, as aspects of the process are common across participants. This may also have implications for individual motivation and buy in.

Development activities have further been distinguished by whether or not they take place in the working environment (‘location and time’ in Table I). It has been argued that different individual-level beliefs and values are associated with effort to develop during leisure time or during (paid) work time (e.g. Birdi *et al.*, 1997; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994; Maurer *et al.*, 2003). All four activities discussed here are likely to take place during work-time, but there is a whole host of others which may not, such as sponsored education.

Development activities also differ in their primary purpose. Appraisals, 360 degree feedback and development centres all involve formal ratings of observed performance against a priori agreed (or at least published) dimensions, usually derived from competency-based frameworks. Coaches may also seek input from other ratees like peers (through 360 degree feedback tools or other means) as part of the coaching process. More informal activities, such as shadowing or buddying, are less unlikely to comprise such an assessment element. However we note that while the emphasis differs, many development activities have a 'hybrid' function (Carrick & Williams, 1998; Fletcher, 1997). They are first a diagnostic tool which assesses respective strengths and weaknesses (on which reward and promotion decisions could be based) and secondly a development tool through the formulation of future-directed development plans and objectives.

A lack of boundaries concerning these dual purposes can however lead to real difficulty and create conflict between the stakeholders involved (see Arnold, 2002). The ownership of feedback needs to be addressed openly in any development activity— even trained assessors may distort their ratings if other decisions hang on the results of development activities. Participants may equally distort their behaviour which may have long-term implications. Such distortions are less likely to happen within the (usually) confidential confines of 360 degree feedback or in a development centre, where assessors are trained to form and provide objective feedback. Any ratings and resulting objectives are usually recorded in Personal Development Plans [PDP], which can be solely held by the focal individual or shared with other organisational stakeholders. Likewise, the content of actual coaching sessions is usually confidential and ownership of data negotiated and agreed upfront, even if outcomes may be shared.

In the case of appraisal discussions, and occasionally Development Centre [DC] reports (and, in the U.S., multi-rater feedback), appraisees' personal data can be used by the organisation to inform other HR decisions such as promotions. In such instances, the assessment agenda of the organisation has the potential for overriding that of the development of individuals (Townley, 1994). To illustrate, it has been noted that appraisal ratings are liable to be influenced by political considerations (Tziner *et al.*, 1996). This could have wide-ranging repercussions for appraisees, regardless of their actual work performance, as negatively distorted ratings are

unlikely to be rewarded with further training or other activities sponsored by the organisation.

The primary purpose and (often less explicit) secondary purposes are clearly linked to the source of feedback. As noted elsewhere (e.g. Fletcher, 2001) the developmental and assessment functions of appraisal, as an example, do not always sit comfortably with each other. Unbiased assessment requires an objective and somewhat impersonal approach, commonly leading to an imposed or, at best, negotiated outcome. By contrast, the developmental aspect of this activity requires sensitive interpersonal skills, leading to a mutual and collaborative outcome. It has been demonstrated that more credible feedback sources, usually a more senior manager, carry more weight than other ratings in the context of 360 degree feedback (see our discussion of 360 degree feedback below). Less attention has been given to this in relation to other activities. Mabey (2003) noted that a myth of expertise may surround the role of the coach. It needs to be investigated closer how the role of the coach, and their withdrawal at the end of a series of coaching sessions, affects outcomes. The same line of thought also applies to other activities such as 360 degree feedback and DCs, where outside expertise is frequently ‘bought in’ as this may fail to move organisations forward towards an independent and long-lasting learning culture.

As the focus dimension in Table I depicts, appraisal, 360 degree feedback and DCs comprise the setting of objectives for a future specified time period, which are then agreed with the immediate line manager and recorded in a PDP. Coaching can, but does not have to, comprise the setting of objectives. Birdi *et al.* (1997) refer to activities, which involve both an assessment of current performance combined with the setting of objectives for the future, as *career planning activities*. Indeed, we argue that clearly set objectives are crucial at least for formal activities if they are to benefit both individuals and organisations. Nonetheless we also acknowledge that development outcomes may also entail less formal elements and personal, as well as professional growth (e.g. Irving & Williams, 2001).

Another way of comparing these activities is by their degree of simulation. Appraisals are very close to the actual job as they are based on agreed performance standards and (usually) conducted by the line manager. The content of coaching sessions will usually focus on concrete work issues that are pertinent to the coachee (such as leadership behaviours for executive coaching, or stress management) and thus be

highly realistic. 360 degree feedback involves the comparison of a self assessment with feedback from work colleagues, managers and occasionally customers thus creating a somewhat artificial ‘feedback round’. DCs rely heavily on simulation, as they are based on the learning value of work samples and/or role-play, and involve feedback from trained observers which tend to have no connection to the participants’ immediate working environment.

Thus, some activities are realistic and close to the job in their content as well as the actual delivery, whereas others comprise specifically designed exercises which participants undergo away from their habitual work context. We propose that the degree of simulation, the content of the activity and the resulting impact on individual development needs to be explored. For example, activities that are close to the job may allow more immediate transfer of learning into the respective work role, but may concurrently be more prone to political interference that undermines learning.

Finally, these activities differ in the frequency of participation and in their position in the development cycle. DCs should ideally form part of an overarching development programme (Vloeberghs & Berghman, 2003), but in reality they tend to be one-off discrete events which are rarely followed up. Participation in 360 degree feedback can also be a stand alone event or could be integral to another activity (such as a development centre or a series of coaching sessions), but programmes are commonly repeated on a cyclical basis. Developmental appraisals tend to be repeated at regular intervals, usually bi-annually or annually; and usually serve as a springboard for diagnosing the need for other activities, such as follow up coaching to address specific needs, the attendance of development centres, or participation in 360 degree feedback. There is a link between frequency and the degree of simulation – the more often an activity occurs, the more ‘real’ it appears. The flipside of this is that more common activities may not have the same effort exerted on them as specific and time-framed activities, which incidentally are also more costly. The implication is that even regular activities need to be reviewed and revised continuously, to ensure that objectives are achieved and managers adequately trained.

Appraisals, coaching, 360 degree feedback and DCs: a comparison of the research literature

In the following, we contrast relevant research on developmental appraisals, coaching, 360 degree feedback and DCs. We focused our search of the relevant literature on work that addresses long-term outcomes (validity) in the field (as opposed to experimental settings), the social context, and individual motivational factors; and map these findings onto the classification framework proposed above. Our results are mainly limited to findings from the U.S. and UK as this is where the majority of relevant studies originated; we thus acknowledge that some of our findings may be context specific, which is a point that we return to in our final discussion.

Developmental appraisals

The use of appraisal or review systems is now widespread (Millward, 2005; Mabey & Ramirez, 2004); where the term appraisal is commonly used in the UK literature (e.g. Fletcher, 2001) and review is used by authors originating from the U.S. (e.g. Nathan et al., 1991). Appraisal is defined as systematic evaluation via face-to-face feedback, some type of goal setting and a reinforcing reward system, using performance scores based on a priori agreed indicators of job-related abilities and occasionally specified targets (DeNisi, 2000). Most studies in the field have focused on performance ratings which are liable to bias and as discussed can be influenced by political considerations (for a full review see Arvey & Murphy, 1998). Much less has been written with regard to the developmental purpose of appraisal although Fletcher (2001) notes that it may thus be best to confine appraisal to developmental aspects as the *primary purpose*. Notably, Nathan *et al.* (1991) evaluated review reactions using supervisor/ subordinate dyads in a longitudinal questionnaire reporting small but significant changes in both supervisors' ratings of performance and in participants' attitudinal measures following review procedures. This provides evidence that the developmental discussions, rather than mere performance ratings, will benefit individual performance outcomes. It also supports our earlier argument that the role of feedback is crucial in development activities. What this study however cannot tell us however, is which particular aspects of the developmental reviews were particularly instrumental, and valued by the dyads, as manager and employee reactions may differ.

Greller (1998) also stresses the importance of understanding the context in which reviews occur, as well as the crucial role of feedback . Using performance review data as well as attitudinal measures from 137 employees, Greller found that participation in a review was influenced most by which manager conducted the review (more than by the specific circumstances of the review) and also that reactions to reviews were moderated by subordinate experience and prior feedback. The managers themselves were unlikely to alter their own behaviour in review interviews. It could be concluded from this study that only employees who have an effective and communicative manager will benefit from reviews, highlighting the crucial role of the feedback source. This finding may appear obvious, but research has thus far neglected the crucial role of managerial behaviour and also reciprocal relationships in the appraisal process. In order to take this study further, one would need to investigate however, how review reactions and manager behaviour are linked to long-term outcomes, such as participation in future activities, development plans or other outcome measures.

One difficulty for such research is that variables such as liking or affect can scarcely be manipulated in an experimental design however and are hard to control in a real life setting (Fletcher, 2001). These methodological difficulties have been noted elsewhere (for a review of ‘liking’ see Lefkowitz, 2000). Nonetheless we need more process-driven field research to help us understand the complexities of appraisal for development. The same mechanism is used for assessing, rewarding as well as developing employees, which makes it difficult to entangle separate processes and outcomes but also has implications for the ownership of data, and thus the usefulness of any ratings. Meta-analytic evidence shows that there is only a marginal link between performance assessments from different sources and outcome measures (Smither, London & Reilly, 2005). It is surprising then that many organisations devote considerable time and budgets to an apparently limited process. We argue that we need more process-driven research, initially qualitative to allow us to build more precise theoretical models. These may unravel under which conditions appraisal is effective for *individual development* – as opposed to performance - and the moderating influence of the manager’s effectiveness.

Coaching

We will now turn to review briefly the current evidence on coaching. The main purpose of coaching has been defined as the facilitation of the performance, learning and development of another individual (Downey, 2003). Coaching usually involves a series of sessions with a trained practitioner (coach) and a participant (coachee). Content, timing and other arrangements are either negotiated by those directly involved, or initiated as part of a development programme. Coaching is used in many different contexts. In the UK, the currently largest application at work is business coaching, followed by career and executive coaching (Palmer & Whybrow, 2004); whilst rudimentary evidence would suggest that career coaching perhaps takes a more prominent role across the globe (Grant & Jackson, 2004). Diverse psychological models have informed coaching practice such as facilitation, cognitive, behavioural or goal focused approaches (Palmer & Whybrow, 2006). However, empirical research and theoretical work on underlying processes is still extant (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

Recently, practitioners have increasingly adopted a positive psychological approach, influenced by the positive psychology movement which originated in the U.S. (e.g. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This places the focus on developing human strength and capability, rather than on ameliorating weakness and development needs.

In this regard, coaching psychology appears to differ fundamentally from the other activities discussed here, where the diagnostic focus is often on diagnosing development needs or weaknesses as rated by others (see *content* dimension in Table I). As summarised in the *ownership of data* dimension in Table I. Another difference from the other activities is that any feedback given is usually private to the coaching sessions, unless coaching is also implemented at the team level (e.g. Chapman, 2004). This may be an advantage of coaching in terms of perceived fairness and acceptability to the coachee, as stakeholders' differing agendas in 360 degree feedback, DCs or appraisal can introduce bias and unfairness to the process. If negotiated well and adhered to, confidentiality and privacy is much easier addressed in the coaching relationship and therefore less likely to be influenced by political currents.

Mabey's (2003) case study of executive coaching in a major retailing organisation used a structural, HRD, political and symbolic frame with a sample of senior managers to elicit the social context of coaching through interviews. The findings highlight that the personal aspect of coaching can have drawbacks and become perceived as too self-indulgent, due to a lack of alignment with organisational objectives. As Mabey argued, development activities that are disconnected from the organisational context are unlikely to contribute to learning in the organisation as a whole. This can also be in issue in 360 degree feedback and DCs, due to the *simulation* element which can alienate the process from its social context.

One line of enquiry that is beginning to emerge is whether coaching is effective as a means of following up other developmental activities, such as 360 degree feedback. In a quantitative study of over 1,000 focal managers using ratings from various sources and comparing effects, London et al. (2003) found that employees, who underwent coaching after a multi-source feedback process, were more likely to adjust behaviours favourably and to set themselves more effective goals. If coaching is commissioned purposefully and thus avoiding any dangers of 'coach dependency' it may constitute a good mechanism to helping to transfer learning from other activities back into the workplace. This study demonstrated that those who receive coaching appear to adjust their behaviour more than those who don't as measured by 360 degree feedback ratings. What needs to be investigated following on from this however, is what aspects of the coaching process were particularly motivational in prompting employees to change, and whether these findings could be generalised to inform such activities in other organizations.

360 degree feedback

360 degree or multi-source multi-rater [MSMR] feedback is based on the assumption that learning from discrepant feedback, particularly when juxtaposed against a self-assessment, results in behavioural changes. MSMR feedback is purported to provide more balanced ratings than one-to-one techniques such as appraisal. In the UK, 360 degree feedback is almost solely used for development whereas in the U.S. it commonly constitutes a basis for organisational decision-making. However, UK writers have argued that 360 degree systems should never be used for the allocation of

promotional or financial rewards as this may introduce unacceptable bias (see Fletcher & Baldry, 1999, for a full review). The usage and usefulness of such methods in other countries has not yet been documented; one exploratory study suggests the effects of self-other agreement vary even within Europe and might be less useful than in the U.S. (Atwater *et al.*, 2005). 360 degree feedback instruments need to be scrutinised and tested just like any other psychometric tool (Fletcher *et al.*, 1998), otherwise they may lack reliability and validity; subsequent evaluation and follow up are needed to enable employees to transfer learning (Wimer & Nowack, 1998).

Nevertheless, 360 degree feedback programmes have offered a unique opportunity for comparing the effects of feedback from different sources. Evidence suggests that those individuals who are more self aware (have more congruent self and other ratings) are better performers (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992) and that self awareness is associated with individual differences such as cognitive reasoning skills (Fletcher & Baldry, 2000). It has also been demonstrated that feedback from different sources is attended to differently, depending on factors such as the credibility and rank of the feedback source (Bailey & Fletcher, 2002; Gregura *et al.*, 2003). However, Maurer *et al.* (2002) found few relationships between 360 degree feedback ratings and subsequent involvement in development activities and employee attitudes toward the feedback system, when a sample of 150 managers was followed up ten months after initial ratings had been collated. Significant findings included two predictors of positive system ratings; these were a work context, which includes people who are supportive of skill development, and beliefs held by feedback recipients that it is possible for people to improve their skills and themselves. Implications of the findings are that 360 degree feedback only becomes valued when part of an overall development programme and participants' belief that they can improve themselves is crucial. We need more research on how both aspects could best be fostered.

Bailey and Fletcher (2002) studied the long-term impact of 360 degree feedback on management competency ratings for 104 target managers. Significant increases in managers' competence were perceived by both the managers themselves and by their subordinates; their development needs were seen to reduce and self- and co-workers ratings appeared to become more congruent. Peer feedback at the time of the baseline measure did not predict behaviour change as measured at the time of the follow up

which casts some doubt on their usefulness. Again this highlights the fact that the source of feedback is crucial for impact on behaviour.

Negative as well as unexpected feedback content could have detrimental consequences (Antonioni, 1996), as this may be difficult to accept and candidates' reactions may range from confusion to defensiveness. In contrast, positive feedback (whether expected or unexpected) might not prompt employees to change their workplace behaviour. One way of evaluating the impact of MSMR feedback is the elicitation of candidates' reactions to determine the social context; however few studies have considered this perspective. Mabey (2001) demonstrated through focus groups and attitude surveys that managers who had experienced multi-rater feedback appraised any development undertaken more favourably in comparison to a naturally existing control group. However, it still needs to be ascertained whether such reactions have validity for predicting long-term development outcomes.

In summary, there have been numerous field investigations of 360 degree feedback which appear to show that it can result in learning in the workplace if the environment is supportive, even though any impact appears moderated by the feedback source and effects in general are relatively modest (Smither *et al.*, 2005).

Development Centres

A growing number of companies use development centres [DCs] or developmental assessment centres as they are commonly called in the U.S. (Oliver & Vincent, 2000; Spsychalski *et al.*, 1997). There seems to be little data from other countries than the UK and the U.S... All DCs entail the multi-rater assessment of multiple exercises, such as job simulation tasks and candidate performance is rated by trained assessors. Participants receive feedback either the end or even after each exercise, which is assumed to enhance participants' motivation to participate in further development and training activities (Goodge, 1994). Many DCs are not solely developmental, but also used to as a diagnostic tool for identifying potential within the organisation (Carrick & Williams, 1999).

The fundamental assumption that DC participation will increase individuals' motivation to develop their skills and career and engage in follow up activities needs

to be critically evaluated (Carrick & Williams, 1998). In a correlational study Halman and Fletcher (2000) showed that rating congruence between self- and observer-ratings increased significantly post event, indicating that DCs enhance self-awareness, but did not consider the link to long-term outcomes.

Engelbrecht and Fischer (1995) evaluated transfer of learning and found that improvements in distinct performance dimensions (as well as for the total managerial performance score) were significantly higher for DC participants than for a control group. Francis-Smythe and Smith (1997) found that DC ratings significantly influenced post centre attitudes such as job involvement and career planning, mediated by candidates' perception of the centre's career impact. Candidates who perceived to have better managerial support were also more likely to receive higher DC ratings; but we note that this study entailed retrospective baseline measures, and a small sample which taken together question the robustness of findings.

Fleenor (1996) found that DC ratings bore no relation to a measure of managerial performance (the averaged ratings from a 360 degree feedback tool) concluding that the evidence showed that resulting developmental feedback may therefore be misleading and detrimental. However, individual career motivation was associated with taking development action and advancement and developmental recommendations only tended to be followed if rating feedback sent a positive message about future advancement; showing that feedback content and individual differences may interact. This is consistent with an early study (Noe & Steffy, 1987). They found that those who received a more favourable recommendation as a result of DC participation engaged in more systematic development activities; but also a negative effect following demotivating feedback content. Another US study did not find any differences between participants and a control group with regard to career advancement and promotions (Jones & Witmore, 1995).

We argue that the degree of simulation could account for the conflicting evidence, as DCs are somewhat removed from the immediate work context, and individuals may hence have little incentive to transfer learning back into the workplace. Thus, the importance of integrating DCs into a wider facilitative environment and organisational strategy is reinforced (Vloeberghs & Berghman, 2003). Also, as Carrick and Williams (1998) pointed out, one might be faced with a paradox as candidates who perform well are likely to stay motivated to drive their own

development following positive feedback; whereas those who do not perform so well might become de-motivated following negative ratings, starting a vicious circle, which is unlikely to meet their (greater) development needs. Future research is needed to determine whether a strengths-based DC approach is more effective for motivating and sustaining long-term self-led development than a focus on the diagnosis and remediation of perceived weaknesses.

Conclusions and implications for practice

The above review produces by no means equivocal evidence for the effectiveness of any of the four activities. Ratings in appraisals are flawed, whereas their developmental aspect appears dependent on the communication between managers and their charges. However we have little evidence on what happens as a result of appraisal interviews in the context of the manager-employee relationship, and how organizations could best optimise this activity to aid long-term individual and organisational development. One potential avenue for research might be to develop training to encourage managers to alter their own behaviour, as appropriate and thus foster an organisational climate that is conducive to development and change. However, to achieve this we first need a better body of evidence on coaching behaviours, but also a deeper understanding of the organizational ramifications and political currents, related to the primary purpose, that may influence effectiveness. Such evidence could then feed into the implementation and evaluation of other activities. For instance, as illustrated above, 360 degree feedback appears to stimulate follow up development activities in some, but by no means all, individuals, and improvements over time remain relatively modest (Smither *et al.*, 2005). Gains are more effective if accompanied by coaching. At the same time, we also need more evidence on what aspects of coaching are effective, for instance whether, and if so how, goal setting is effective at eliciting behaviour change in the coaching relationship. We argue that it is important that clear objectives are set and mutually negotiated to provide focus to formal activities, to coaching and beyond, as otherwise eventual evaluation will be lacking a clear benchmark.

In summary, we offer the classification set out in Table 1 as a guide future research and practice. Whilst we are conscious that we only considered four different activities

within the realm of this article, our framework could be broadened to also compare other activities, such as mentoring, buddying, secondments, temporary promotions or education sponsorship. For instance, ‘ownership of data’ is vital to consider for any activities that entail some form of assessment and should be made explicit, as ratings that are widely shared are likely to be distorted. This may have a knock on effect on individuals’ motivation to develop, particularly if feedback has been negative. Practitioners should also be mindful of the degree of simulation involved in any activities open to employees, as this may impact on transfer of learning into the workplace. Thus, activities high in simulation may be needed where objective assessment is needed, but would need to be supplemented by activities low in simulation to enable transfer of learning.

Practitioners should also be mindful that the spectrum of activities offered to employees covers the entire development cycle. At present, there is perhaps too great a focus on initial diagnosis and less focus on activities that sustain momentum.

We acknowledge as a potential limitation of our article that much of the research discussed pertains to the U.S. and UK; we thus have not been able to discuss potential cultural differences (see Mabey and Finch-Lees, 2008, for further discussion of this). We hope that a broader body of research on employee development emerges over time that would elicit whether the classification offered here can be generalised at an international level.

To conclude, practitioners and researchers alike could use our classification framework to assess development activities as a loose framework to assess both effectiveness of implementation and long-term outcomes. We hope that some of our classifications, such as ‘ownership of data’, will deliberately draw attention to the potential for conflicting expectations and demands from different organizational stakeholder. However, if these are acknowledged openly and thus managed, then organizations may be in a position to nurture a more fertile breeding ground for sustainable employee development. We note that most of the studies discussed above take a quantitative approach, which is perhaps not surprising given that we wanted to give particular reference, amongst our other criteria, to long term outcomes. However we note the lack of evidence for long term validity, and advocate that qualitative studies could help us unravel this seeming lack of sustained effectiveness. For instance, we still know little about how feedback from different sources is actually

attended to and integrated by individuals, and to what degree it motivates them to take charge of their own development, as purported in the paradigm of the new careers (e.g. Hall, 1996). Qualitative but longitudinal research could help us to unravel such complexities, also considering the role of the line manager in the transfer of learning and follow through of PDPs back in the workplace. We also need to know more about how learning from highly simulated activities, such as DCs or 360, can successfully be integrated into wider individual and organizational strategies, and how to ameliorate the effects of negative feedback. For instance, future research may determine whether such processes result in more sustained outcomes (e.g. effects on individual motivation) if the process actively focuses on promoting individual strengths.

Thus, our classification may inform both qualitative and quantitative studies, which we do not see as mutually exclusive, but complementary in their approach to helping us understand the complexities of employee development in practice. Ultimately, this may help us to understand, when and under what conditions which particular types of development activities are best suited to meet both individual organisational requirements.

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Table I: A comparative classification of employee development activities

Classification	Types of activity			
	Developmental appraisal	Coaching	360 degree feedback	Development Centres
1. Degree of formality	Usually formal and planned as part of a performance review cycle; with accompanying documentation. Performance ratings and PDP may be discussed in separate or interlinked sessions. Highly defined objectives	Usually a series of pre-planned and formal sessions, negotiated objectives depend on purpose, context and setting; but could be less formal if individually negotiated between coach and coachee	High degree of formality through carefully designed (competency based) questionnaires and resulting feedback reports, plus facilitated feedback sessions. Highly defined objectives	Highly formal, based on a priori developed framework to assess behavioural dimensions with help of trained internal and/or external assessors/ observers. Highly defined objectives
2. Organisational expectation	Usually mandatory, as part of the wider performance management and reward system	Voluntary, but could be mandatory (e.g. to address failure to perform)	Voluntary (in the U.S. more likely to be mandatory); however could potentially be linked to wider, mandatory programme (e.g. for employees on fast track programme)	Voluntary, though employees can be 'encouraged' to participate or put forward for participation by line manager
3. Ownership of 'data' / feedback	Line manager and individual, central records may be held in HR and use for multiple purposes, e.g. also for disciplinary matters	Coach and individual, although some data often shared with line manager	Usually confidential to individual, who has discretion to share with boss and colleagues	Individual data shared with coach and line manager
4. Location and time	Workplace during work-time	Usually workplace during work-time	Workplace during work-time, though questionnaire completion may occur outside work	Usually off-site and, if residential, will impinge on evenings (Arnold, 2002; Fletcher, 1997)
5. Primary purpose	Performance assessment, target setting and personal development plan (PDP)	The purpose is variable; ranges from enhancement of specific performance aspects through to outplacement counselling	Increase self-awareness for personal development (in the US, more likely to be used for performance management)	Identify PDP and career development
6. Source of feedback	Line manager observation (can include solicited peer comments)	Coach, who may seek input from manager and/ or colleagues	Behavioural feedback from range of colleagues and occasionally internal or external customers	Assessor/coach observation and analysis of simulation exercises, psychometric tests etc

7. Focus	Past, present and future	Present and future	Past and future	Primarily future
8. Degree of simulation	Low, feedback based on actual work performance	Low, as actual work behaviours are discussed as part of coaching session	Intermediate as based on observation of work behaviours, however facilitated feedback may be removed from workplace	High, primarily exercises which simulate workplace activities
9. Content	Usually comprises discussion of ratings, as well as formulation of PDP. Tends to focus on developmental needs, rather than strengths	Variable; usually comprises an assessment element, as well as formulation of plans and goals, as well as individualised 'homework' between sessions. Recently emphasis on a strength-based approach (rather than diagnosis and amelioration of weaknesses)	Collection of ratings from multiple sources which are fed back to recipient in written report and/ or feedback discussion with manager or trained individual. Focus often directed to developmental needs; e.g. where large discrepancy between self- and other ratings	Variety of exercises (such as simulations, group discussions, interviews) as well as feedback session. Focus often directed at diagnosis development needs, and appropriate action to address these.
10. Frequency	Usually once or twice a year	Variable, but usually several sessions needed	Gap of 6-18 months between questionnaires	Infrequent
11. Development Cycle	Initial diagnostic mechanism to formulate e.g. PDP to address individual needs	Typically an activity that follows earlier diagnosis e.g. in performance appraisal	May be used as a diagnostic mechanism e.g. as part of coaching, or as part of DC	Could be an early diagnostic activity, e.g. to identify needs as part of a fast track programme, or developmental activity in its own right