

Generic vs specific: re-thinking the way we manage performance

by Anton Grobler^{*}, Aleksandra Hyra^{**} and Magda Bezuidenhout^{***}

Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine whether the performance management process at the level of director positions at a South African higher education institution should follow a generic or a specific approach. The population consisted of 58 positions and a mixed method approach was used. Statistically significant differences between the categories of directors' positions with regard to the identified job evaluation variables as well as actual performance rating scores were tested by means of a one-way ANOVA and, where applicable, Scheffe's post-hoc test was used to determine which specific means differed. A qualitative analysis of the generic performance agreement template assigned to all the directors' positions and the actual performance agreements was performed to draw comparisons and to identify certain trends. The results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis revealed a clear differentiation between the directors' positions and there was no consistent use of the directors' performance agreement template, with certain objectives tending to be scaled down. The findings of this study inform HR practitioners and organisations that the performance management process needs to be linked to specific job criteria, thereby enabling objective feedback and development initiatives for individual employees and should ultimately contribute to improved performance management practices in the South African work context.

Key words: performance; performance management; specificity

1 Introduction

An acre of performance is worth a whole world of promise - William Dean Howells.

As illustrated by Lawler (2010:1), "the existence of an effective performance management system is often the major differentiator between organisations that produce adequate results and those that excel". The need to manage and measure performance exists in all spheres of life as the pressure to perform continues to be a reality. Aguinis (2009) is of the view that despite these pressures the existence of an established performance management system can make significant contributions to an

^{*} Dr A Grobler, is the Director: Organisation Development & HR Information Systems and attached to the Department of Human Resource Management at the University of South Africa.

^{**} Ms AM Hyra is a Lecturer in the Department of Human Resource Management at the University of South Africa.

^{***} Ms ML Bezuidenhout is a Lecturer in the Department of Human Resource Management at the University of South Africa.

organisation and should be seen as a driver leading towards business excellence rather than an administrative duty.

Management is continuously striving for and requesting feedback on the achievement of set targets and business objectives, and as a result management could hardly exist without measurement (Lebas 1995). Organisations achieve their objectives via individuals and in order to monitor the attainment of set business objectives, the performance of these individuals needs to be assessed and measured. The need to measure performance at all levels of an organisation has therefore led to the development of performance management systems (Lefter & Puia 2009). Organisations are currently faced with an ever-changing business environment that may range from rapid growth to a sudden need for downsizing, and despite periods of growth or turbulence, the focus on performance management seems to remain a constant. The majority, of organisations – if not all – have at least one performance management system in place that is used to evaluate the performance of individual employees and to manage and assess organisational objectives (Aguinis, Joo & Gottfredson 2011; Yu, Hamid, Ijab & Soo 2009).

The fundamental purpose of performance management is to focus organisations toward achieving strategic objectives and ultimately striving for alignment by linking individual staff objectives to broader organisational objectives (Bhave & Brutus 2011; Forrester 2011; Martinez 2000; Whitford & Coetsee 2006; Yu et al 2009). Therefore, the successful use of performance management systems in organisations relies on having clear and easily recognisable objectives, and employees need to have an understanding of their performance expectations (Biron, Farndale & Paauwe 2011; Broadbent, Laughlin & Gallop 2009). However, there is some uncertainty as to how performance management systems work in complex departments with disparate objectives (Broadbent et al 2009).

Lebas (1995:27) contends that: “performance is defined by different parameters” and this is illustrated by examining the output required from an HR department versus the output required from an engineering division within the same organisation. We all agree that these outputs differ significantly and each individual position within an organisation serves a purpose and should therefore be measured according to that specific purpose. This view is supported by Lefter and Puia (2009), who indicate that individuals should be evaluated based on job requirements, although it could also be important to differentiate the performance management process for employees in different departments/sections according to the responsibilities assigned to each position.

Frear and Paustian-Underdahl (2011) bring forth the argument that many organisations use a single, generalised, cover-all performance appraisal for all employees instead of defining job performance more specifically for each job. If individuals are not clear about their performance expectations then how would they know whether they are doing something right if they do not know what they are supposed to be doing? In addition, how can effective feedback and development of individuals take place if workers are being measured against generalised performance criteria?

Due to the diverse outputs required from each position within an organisation, performance management should demonstrate a link between individual jobs and specific tasks or behaviours, thus creating a need to substitute generality with specificity (Frear & Paustian-Underdahl 2011:199). These authors further argue that specificity is needed for the performance management process to be practical for employee development and effective for organisational performance. The premise of

the study on which this article is based therefore rested on the view that different jobs demand different outputs, and performance should ideally be assessed on outputs related to specific job criteria. This article shows that, within the positions at director's level, these positions are diverse, and consequently, this diversity has identified discrepancies in performance outputs. These discrepancies highlight the need to determine the possibility of adopting a specific rather than a generic approach to the performance management process by linking performance outputs to specific job criteria as proposed by Frear and Paustian-Underdahl (2011). A specific approach to performance management will ultimately enable organisations to provide employees with specific performance feedback and identify specific development requirements.

2 Aims of the study

The aim of the present study was to determine whether the performance management process at the level of director positions in a South African higher education institution should follow a generic or a specific approach. The concept of specificity as proposed by Frear and Paustian-Underdahl (2011) will therefore be applied across the categories of directors' positions, and the concept of generality will still be applicable within the categories of directors' positions. In the context of the present study, the directors' positions at the institution seemed to be diverse and current performance management practices at the institution consisted of a generic performance agreement template which was applied to all the directors' positions and which was used to set performance outputs. Given the importance of performance management practices, and a constant need by organisations to assess and measure performance at all levels, this study is expected to contribute to important knowledge that will ultimately lead to improved performance management practices in the South African work context.

3 Performance management

Many definitions of performance management exist, and most of them share a view that encompasses performance management as a process that entails identifying, measuring, developing and improving employee performance, creating a shared workforce understanding about what is to be achieved at an organisational level and ensuring that employee performance supports organisational objectives (Aguinis 2009; Armstrong 2009; DeNisi & Pritchard 2006; Dessler 2008; Latham, Borgogni & Petitta 2008; Pulakos 2009; Yu et al 2009).

3.1 Purpose of performance management

According to Lawler (2010:1), it is "far from easy to get performance management right in an organization". Performance management has always been a sensitive and contentious issue for employers and employees alike and when we hear the term performance management it is often followed by terms like targets, objectives and most importantly measurement. Most people would agree that the term performance management is seldom associated with development. Pulakos and O'Leary (2011) emphasise that if performance management is implemented inadequately its effects can damage employee confidence and harm employee-employer relationships, and the large number of unsuccessful attempts to improve performance management highlights its inherent difficulties. Organisations also fail to notice that performance management is an integrated process linked to numerous other activities.

The central focus of performance management is the development and improvement of the performance of individuals (Armstrong 2009). Its purpose is two-fold: performance management systems are intended to help achieve business objectives and they provide valuable information for HR-related decisions and development activities (Aguinis 2009; Aguinis & Pierce 2008). Pulakos (2009) is of the view that the majority of organisations use their performance management system to support pay, bonus and promotional decisions or to guide employee development.

3.2 Performance planning

Performance management is a collaborative, cyclical, flexible and continuous process comprising specific stages (Aguinis 2009; Armstrong 2009; Aguinis & Pierce 2008). In support of the view of specificity as proposed by Frear and Paustian-Underdahl (2011), the identification of specific tasks and job performance criteria takes place during the initial phase of the performance management process. Armstrong (2009), Aguinis (2009) and Pulakos (2004) refer to this stage as performance planning and this entails a combined effort by the manager and employee to identify individual job results and behaviours. Performance planning takes results into consideration. These refer to what needs to be done and they take into consideration the key accountabilities or the broad areas of a job for which the employee is responsible (Aguinis 2009:38). These broad areas of a job or key accountabilities are often referred to as key performance areas (KPA) or key performance indicators (KPIs). Parmenter (2007:3) defines KPIs as "a set of measures focusing on those aspects of organisational performance that are most critical for the current and future success of the organisation". KPIs are "current" or future-oriented and they should tell you what action needs to take place. Additionally, KPIs define the results or outcomes that are identified as being crucial to the achievement of high performance and they provide the basis for defining the crucial goals for which individuals are accountable (Armstrong 2009:68, 234).

4 Research design

In this section, the background of the research, the research approach, population, measuring instrument, research procedure and statistical analysis are presented.

The context of the study was a higher education institution and the positions analysed consisted of one level of positions, namely all the directors within the institution. Current literature as well as feedback from top management during performance management moderation sessions highlighted the concern that a standard measuring tool for performance was not practical across the board as it became evident that the directors' positions are very diverse. The diverse nature of the directors' positions made it difficult to compare the performance of the positions fairly and brought about a need to determine whether the performance management process should follow a generic or a specific approach. The generic key performance areas assigned to all the director positions are summarised in Table 1.

4.1 Research approach

A mixed method approach was used in this study, and both qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied (Berndt & Petzer 2011; Creswell & Plano Clark 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). The study was both empirical and descriptive in nature.

Table 1
Generic key performance areas

Key performance area (KPA)	Description
Strategic/transformational leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assisting top management with the management and long-term development of the institution Drafting plans for the directorate and infusing a planning and project management capacity in the directorate Providing strategic advice on their area of responsibility Operationalising social justice and fairness, advancing employment equity and diversity and general staff health and wellness Managing interdependencies with other units, ensuring long-term financial sustainability, taking responsibility for the development, maintenance and implementation of the risk management plan
Transactional leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing human and financial resources Overseeing and improving quality assurance, service excellence and the use of technology in the directorate
Professional citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serving on institutional committees outside his/her area of responsibility Contributing to his/her profession through serving on professional bodies Attending to professional registration, where applicable, and ensuring continuous professional development

4.2 Population

The population consisted of all the directors' positions within the institution (N=58). The directors' positions are summarised in Table 2 and are divided according to primary and institutional support functions.

Table 2
Summary of director positions

Function	Number of positions
Primary support (academic support services such as curriculum development and student affairs)	23
Institutional support (such as human resources and finance)	35

4.3 Measuring instruments

The Peromnes job evaluation system was used to analyse existing job evaluation results and to develop objective position-specific information.

Job evaluation can generally be defined as an assessment of the work involved in a specific position, the responsibilities attached to the position and the skills, experience and qualifications required to succeed in the position, all with a view to determining the appropriate remuneration for the position and differentiating the position from other work done in the organisation (Bussin 2011; *Dictionary of Business and Management* 2006; Muchinsky 2006). Bussin (2011) states that job evaluation helps management and employees to understand how different jobs relate to each other. Armstrong (2007) refers to this differentiation as the establishment of internal relativities, as each position has its intrinsic value, based on the level of responsibility and the skill required to perform the tasks involved. Job evaluation enables different positions to be compared

with agreed common standards, and this process is also used to place positions into categories, especially in large organisations, and to bring order into a pay structure (Bussin 2011). The institution's grading system (Peromnes) clusters all the directors' positions on Peromnes level 4, which is defined as "Senior management and specialists" by Deloitte and Touche, the owners of the system (Swanepoel, Erasmus & Schenk 2008:493).

Peromnes, as applied by the institution, comprises eight factors, namely problem solving, consequence of judgement, pressure of work, knowledge, job impact (combined internal and external impact scores), comprehension, educational qualifications, and experience (Swanepoel et al 2008).

The job evaluation was conducted by an external expert and validated by an internal job evaluation review committee made up of job content experts. The eight Peromnes factors were rated using an ordinal scale. The directors were evaluated by different panels – two levels of management above the directors in terms of the hierarchy and in accordance with institutional policy. The directors' performance scores were also moderated by the director's performance assessment moderating committee of the institution to ensure consistency, to enhance the integrity and alignment of the scores and to limit the subjectivity of the initial evaluation panel. A 5-point Likert rating scale was used with a rating of 5 = outstanding, 4 = exceeds expectations, 3 = meets expectations, 2 = needs improvement and 1 = does not meet minimum standards.

The qualitative analysis was based on the evaluation of the generic performance agreement template used for all directors' positions within the institution and the actual 2010 performance agreements. This analysis was performed to make comparisons regarding the use of the agreement and to identify certain trends.

4.4 Research procedure

All job evaluation results of the directors grouping from 2004 to 2009 were merged into one dataset. Twenty-three of the 58 positions (about 40%) have been evaluated more than once over a five-year period. The information yielded by the job evaluations was very static and positions were only re-evaluated after significant restructuring. In cases where more than one result was found, only the most recent evaluation results were used for this analysis. The Peromnes job evaluation results of all 58 directors' positions were retrieved and included in the analysis. The 2009 year-end moderated performance assessment scores were matched with the job evaluation results.

The objective position-specific information was determined and included in the database. This includes:

- (i) size of directorate in terms of number of employees;
- (ii) a standardised employee grade, converted to an average Peromnes grade for all employees in the directorate; and
- (iii) the average 2009 year-end performance assessment results of the employees in the respective directorates.

The directors (and their results) have been excluded from the information contained in (ii) and (iii) to avoid contamination.

Categories of directors were established by using the size of the directorate (in terms of the number of employees) as a differentiating measure. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the distribution of the variables across the directors' positions as well

as the categories of the directors' positions, and variables were correlated to determine the extent to which a relationship existed between them.

Lastly, a qualitative analysis of the directors' performance agreements was carried out to determine possible areas of differentiation across the categories of directors' positions. In line with the responsibilities of the directors, the template indicated that the main competencies expected of a director are the quality of leadership and guidance he/she demonstrates in terms of setting standards, assigning targets via the delegation process, allocating resources, and ensuring regular reporting and appropriate action to achieve the targets set for the directorate.

4.5 Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, skewness and kurtosis) were used to analyse the data. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between the categories of director' positions with regard to the identified job evaluation variables as well as actual performance rating score variables. When the results of the ANOVA test indicated a statistical significance, Sheffe's post-hoc tests were carried out to determine which groups differed significantly (Davis 2007:397). A significance level of 5% was used. Correlations were calculated to determine the existence of linear relationships between all the variables included in the study. The statistical analysis was carried out by means of Statistica (version 10), a statistical program.

5 Results

In this section, the results and findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis are presented.

5.1 Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics on the number of employees in the directorates are reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics: Number of employees within the directorate

	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Employees	58	44.94	1.00	259.00	58.31

The results reported in Table 3 support the rationale of this study, namely to ascertain the specific areas of differentiation between the directors' positions at the institution (in this instance, size of the directorate in terms of employees), and the inclusion thereof in the performance management process. It is important to mention that only one quantitative criterion, the number of employees per directorate as a measure, was used as a differentiating variable for the purpose of this analysis. This is often a valid indicator of the nature of the purpose and functions across a range of work units, and a valuable gauge to differentiate between categories, although it is not so accurate when a single position is evaluated.

Table 4 shows the categorisation of the directors' positions based on the number of employees in the directorate, and the distribution of the directors' positions.

Table 4
Categorisation and distribution of directors' positions

Category	Number of employees	Count	Per cent
Large	≥ 53	14	24.14
Directing/medium	11–52	28	48.28
Small	6–10	7	12.07
Specialist	≤ 5	9	15.58

5.2 One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether statistically significant group differences existed between the categories of director positions with regard to problem solving, consequence of judgement, pressure of work, knowledge, job impact, comprehension, qualifications, experience, directors' 2009 year-end performance rating, average employee 2009 year-end performance rating and employee level. The results are reported in Table 5.

Table 5
One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

Variable	Groups used	F-value	Significance (p value)
Problem solving	Categories of director positions: Large, Directing/Medium, Small, Specialist	1.92	0.12
Consequence of judgement		0.47	0.76
Pressure of work		3.59	0.01
Knowledge		1.37	0.26
Job impact		0.21	0.93
Comprehension		0.69	0.60
Qualifications		0.12	0.95
Experience		3.47	0.01
Directors 2009 year-end performance rating		0.11	0.98
Average employee 2009 year-end performance rating		3.59	0.01
Employee level		2.47	0.05

The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences at the 5% level of significance between the categories of director positions with regard to pressure of work, experience, average employee 2009 year-end performance rating and employee level.

5.3 Tests for specific significant differences: multiple comparisons

In order to determine which specific groups differed statistically significantly from each other for the variables where the ANOVA results indicated a statistical significance, the Scheffe post-hoc test was used and the statistically significant differences are reported in Table 6.

Pressure of work

Table 6 indicates that, post-hoc comparisons using the Scheffe test indicated that the mean score for the *Specialist* group ($M=23.56$, $SD=1.47$) was statistically significantly different from (i) the *Large* group ($M=26.46$, $SD=0.78$), (ii) the *Directing/Medium* group ($M=25.26$, $SD=1.70$) and (iii) the *Small* group ($M=25.71$, $SD=2.0$). The results suggest

that the *Specialist* group of directors differs significantly from the other groups in terms of pressure of work, with this group reporting lower work pressure.

Table 6
Scheffe post-hoc test – statistically significant differences: pressure of work, levels of experience, performance rating, employee level

Variable	Groups between which a significant statistical difference was detected	Significance (p value)
Peromnes – Pressure of work	Specialist and Large	0.01
	Specialist and Directing/Medium	0.04
	Specialist and Small	0.05
Experience (as a Peromnes score)	Specialist and Large	0.03
Average employee 2009 year-end performance rating	Specialist and Large	0.05
	Specialist and Directing / Medium	0.09
Employee level (Average Peromnes grade)	Small and Large	0.08

Levels of experience

The mean score for the *Large* group ($M=24.46$, $SD=1.45$) was statistically significantly different from the *Specialist* group ($M=21.78$, $SD=2.53$). The results suggest that the *Large* group of directors differs significantly, with this group of directors requiring more experience than those directors managing smaller directorates.

Average employee 2009 year-end performance rating

The mean score for the *Specialist* group ($M=3.56$, $SD=0.28$) was statistically significantly different from (i) the *Large* group ($M=3.30$, $SD=0.17$) and (ii) the *Directing/Medium* group ($M=3.34$, $SD=0.21$). The results suggest that the *Specialist* group of directors differs significantly, with this group of directors obtaining a higher performance rating for the employees in the directorate. The results also indicate that the smaller the directorate, the higher the average performance rating of the employees.

Employee level

The mean score for the *Small* group ($M=7.06$, $SD=1.51$) was statistically significantly different from the score for the *Large* group ($M=9.05$, $SD=1.46$). The results suggest that the *Small* group of directors differs significantly, with this group reporting a higher employee level. This is also an indication of the level of complexity of the work required in that specific directorate, suggesting that there is a higher level of complexity of the work in the *Small* directorates than in the *Large* directorates.

5.4 Correlation matrix

The correlation matrix with all the Peromnes factors, as well as the objective position-specific variables, is captured in Table 7.

Table 7 shows that the following Peromnes factors indicated a statistically significant relationship at the 5% level of significance. The value of the correlation coefficient (r) is provided in brackets:

- (i) *Problem solving* showed a significant relationship with *Pressure of work* (0.38) and *Knowledge* respectively (0.42), where both linear relationships were positive.
- (ii) *Consequence of judgement* correlated positively with *Knowledge* (0.34) and *Job impact* (0.57) respectively.

- (iii) *Pressure of work* showed a positive linear relationship with *Experience* (0.35), and a negative relationship with *Qualifications* (-0.32).
- (iv) *Knowledge* correlated positively with *Comprehension* (0.31).
- (v) *Comprehension* reported a positive correlation with *Experience* (0.27).
- (vi) A negative relationship existed between *Experience* and *Qualifications* (-0.42).

Table 7
Peromnes correlation matrix

	Mean	SD	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	PR(D)	PR(E)	PG(E)	E(N)
P1	26.0	1.3		0.15	0.38	0.42	-0.18	-0.01	-0.19	0.05	-0.11	-0.1	-0.06	-0.12
P2	22.4	1.4	0.15		0.16	0.34	0.57	0.25	0.02	0.13	-0.05	-0.02	0.04	0.21
P3	25.3	1.7	0.38	0.16		-0.16	-0.2	0.09	-0.32	0.35	-0.09	-0.20	0.09	0.30
P4	25.8	1.3	0.42	0.34	-0.16		0.21	0.31	0.15	-0.07	0.09	0.16	0.07	-0.18
P5	22.3	1.1	-0.18	0.57	-0.20	0.21		0.17	-0.06	0.12	0.09	0.02	0.16	0.25
P6	26.7	0.8	-0.01	0.25	0.09	0.31	0.17		0.00	0.27	0.05	0.06	0.18	0.15
P7	28.9	1.7	-0.19	0.02	-0.32	0.15	-0.06	0.00		-0.42	-0.12	0.05	-0.11	-0.08
P8	23.1	2.1	0.05	0.13	0.35	-0.07	0.12	0.27	-0.42		0.27	-0.21	0.30	0.45
PR(D)	3.5	0.3	-0.11	-0.05	-0.09	0.09	0.09	0.05	-0.12	0.27		0.30	0.08	0.09
PR(E)	3.4	0.2	-0.10	-0.02	-0.20	0.16	0.02	0.06	0.05	-0.21	0.30		-0.40	-0.24
PG(E)	8.2	1.6	-0.06	0.04	0.09	0.07	0.16	0.18	-0.11	0.30	0.08	-0.40		0.30
E(N)	45.3	59.7	-0.12	0.21	0.30	-0.18	0.25	0.15	-0.08	0.45	0.09	-0.24	0.30	

Highlighted correlations are significant ($p < .05$); $N=53$

Where: P1: *Peromnes* – Problem solving

P2: *Peromnes* – Consequence of judgement

P3: *Peromnes* – Pressure of work

P4: *Peromnes* – Knowledge

P5: *Peromnes* – Job impact (combined internal and external impact scores);

P6: *Peromnes* – Comprehension

P7: *Peromnes* – Qualifications

P8: *Peromnes* – Experience

PR(D) – Directors' 2009 year-end performance rating

PR(E) – Mean score of employee's 2009 year-end performance rating

PG(E) – Standardised employee grade, converted to an average

Peromnes grade (all personnel), and

E(N) – Number of employees in the directorate

The *Peromnes* factors and the size of the correlation coefficient between them highlighted the complexity of each position and indicated that work pressure is often the result of the demand to solve complex problems. Experience is needed to cope with the pressures of a director's position; in fact acquired qualifications do not necessarily contribute to the tolerance of pressure. The consequences of decisions made (judgement) are related to the impact the job (and consequently also the decisions) has on both the internal and the external environment. Knowledge contributes to a higher level of comprehension in terms of the understanding of spoken and written communication relevant to the director's position. Education in terms of minimum qualifications to function successfully in the director's position shows a negative relationship to experience, which means that the one supersedes the other, depending on the specific requirements of the position.

A director's performance rating was found to be positively related to that of the employees in his/her directorate (0.30); in other words, the director received a better

rating where he/she had a high-performing team (as measured by the average performance rating of the employees in the directorate, excluding the performance rating of the director), as indicated in Table 7. Furthermore, the smaller the directorate, the higher the average performance rating of the employees (-0.24). The lower the Peromnes grade (in other words the higher the position level of the employees in the directorate), the higher the average performance rating of the directorate (0.30).

The only statistically significant relationships between the objective variables and the Peromnes scores were the following:

- (i) Pressure of work is positively related to the number of employees (0.30), which is an indication that managerial demands increase with the number of employees, requiring the setting of strict priorities, processes and procedures to keep interruptions and distractions to the minimum.
- (ii) Experience is positively related to employee level (0.30), which is an indication that managing a large number of employees, as well as personnel at a lower job level, necessitates a high level of experience relevant to that specific director's position.

5.5 Qualitative analysis

The analysis of the 2010 performance agreements of all the directors in the *Specialist* category pointed to the following trends:

The key performance areas (KPA) in the agreement of one of the directors in the *Specialist* category differed completely from the six standard KPAs in the generic director agreement, and another agreement departed substantially from the standard KPAs. Although the other director agreements used the six standard KPAs for directors, the objectives and/or activities tended to be scaled down. In three of the agreements, the objectives relating to human resource management were limited or non-existent. In another three of the agreements, no mention was made of financial management and accountability for budgets. This was in line with the fact that more than 70% of the directors in the *Specialist* category (5 of the 7) were not responsibility centre managers (no budget directly attached to the directorate). The activities detailed in most of the agreements reflected personal responsibility for high-level specialised functions rather than being responsible for financial and other assets and overseeing, coordinating and monitoring the work of others, as was the case for directors in charge of small, medium and large directorates. In this sense, the *Specialist* directors' positions seemed to be more comparable to those of high-level experts (e.g. professors).

6 Discussion

Overall, the results of both the qualitative and the quantitative analysis indicated a clear differentiation between the four categories of director positions at the institution. The directors' positions at the institution were diverse in nature and their dynamic nature was explained by an indication that managing a large number of employees, as well as personnel at a lower job level, necessitated a high level of experience relevant to that specific director's position. The results of the study suggested that directors managing larger directorates require more experience than those managing smaller directorates. Furthermore, differentiation across categories was reported, with the *Specialist* category of directors differing significantly from the other categories in terms of the pressure of work. This category reported lower work pressure than the other categories.

It was further reported that the categories of directors' positions also differed in terms of the level of complexity of the work, with the *Small* category reporting a higher level of complexity.

This differentiation indicated that although the categories of director positions differed significantly, a general performance agreement template was applied to all the positions irrespective of the category. According to Lefter and Puia (2009:269), employees' performance evaluation should be adapted to specific activities and a high degree of objectivity should be developed and this cannot happen if individual job requirements have not been specified from the outset or if individuals are allocated generalised objectives. Frear and Paustian-Underdahl (2011:198) also indicate that identifying specific job performance criteria is critical for developing an objective performance management system which is fair, unbiased and practical for employee development. Therefore, linking performance management to specific job criteria could increase the quality of feedback and development provided to employees. Although a general performance agreement template was applied to all the positions irrespective of the category, the results of the qualitative assessment showed that there was no consistent use of the directors' performance agreement template, with the objectives and/or activities tending to be scaled down in the *Specialist* directors' category.

7 Conclusions, implications and recommendations

7.1 Conclusions and implications

In view of the differentiation across the categories of director positions, it is suggested that performance at the institution, specifically for those directors falling within the *Specialist* category, should be assessed differently from the performance of those directors who fall into the other categories. Furthermore, the performance agreement template for directors should accommodate these differences. The categories of director positions varied significantly and the concept of specificity could be applied across the categories of directors' positions; the concept of generality would still be applicable within the categories of directors' positions (Frear & Paustian-Underdahl 2011). In order to measure performance more effectively, a need therefore exists to adapt the performance agreement template with the aim of defining job performance more specifically for each category of directors. In addition, it appeared that the focus of the performance agreement for the directors falling within the *Specialist* category should be reconsidered to meet the specific expectations of the position.

These findings pave the way for a new outlook on performance management and support the view proposed by Martinez (2000) and Cascio (2011), which suggests that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to performance management is no longer appropriate and the onus therefore rests on each organisation to evaluate its own performance management system to recognise the potential problem areas and select a solution that best fits their situation (Fryer, Antony & Ogden 2009). More specifically, as organisations are evolving and adapting to the changing work environment, coupled with the versatile nature of each individual position, a need has arisen to substitute generality for specificity in order to measure performance more effectively, enabling objective feedback and development initiatives (Frear & Paustian-Underdahl 2011). Furthermore, Lefter and Puia (2009) suggest that organisations should conduct a differentiated assessment according to the responsibilities assigned to each position. This view is supported by the findings of this study, which showed that at the level of

directors' positions, the responsibilities attached to each position vary significantly and as a result outputs also differ, and it is for these reasons that the performance management process should follow a specific rather than a generic approach.

7.2 Recommendations

The aim of the study was to determine whether the performance management process at the level of director positions at a South African higher education institution should follow a generic or a specific approach. The implication of this study was that different jobs entail different outputs and performance should ideally be assessed on outputs related to specific job criteria. If further investigations are conducted, the limitations of this study will need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, since this study was conducted within a South African higher education institution, research in other organisations and sectors would be useful in validating the findings of this study. Secondly, because this study consisted of a specific job level, namely directors within the institution, it cannot be generalised to other positions or categories of positions within the institution, although the diverse nature and number of positions were significant. It is therefore recommended that a more diverse range of positions be used in future studies.

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