

Impact of Performance Improvement Programs on Employee Redressals in Software Industries: An Empirical Investigation

Dr.B.R.Srivalli

Assistant professor
MJR College

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1765-0010>

Abstract

Performance Improvement Programs (PIPs) are a popular management technique in software companies that want to tackle employee under-performance. But empirical studies of their interaction with employee grievance redressal mechanisms are still not fully explored. The study aimed to examine the effect of PIPs on employee redressal outcomes using a quantitative cross-sectional study design in the Indian software industry. 200 employees from 6 leading IT Companies in Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Pune were surveyed using a structured questionnaire. Data is analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression and one way ANOVA. Results indicate that PIP transparency ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and supervisor support ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) are the strongest factors to predict effective PIP outcomes; PIP duration and perceived fairness acted as moderating effects between the variables. Employees who saw PIPs as developmental, as opposed to punitive, were significantly more satisfied with the grievance resolution ($M = 4.12$ vs. $M = 2.78$; $p < 0.001$). These findings highlight the importance of organisations developing well-structured redressal mechanisms, HR mediation and clear communication policies for PIPs.

Keywords: Performance Improvement Program (PIP), Employee Redressal, Grievance Management, HR Practices, Software Industry, Organizational Justice, India

1. Introduction

In the last 20 years there has been an exponential increase in the use of formal performance management frameworks in the software industry. Of all these, Performance Improvement Programs (PIPs) have turned out to be an organized system of intervention to pinpoint and correct

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.501

substandard employee performance in specified timeframes. A PIP usually outlines specific areas of performance failure, establishes measurable improvements and outlines the repercussions of failure, such as termination, transfer, or demotion (Pulakos et al., 2015; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

Although commonly used, PIPs are still one of the most hotly debated practices in organizational HRM. However, critics claim that PIPs are used disproportionately to initiate termination proceedings and not as a true development tool, leading to employee grievances, litigation, and damage to an organization's reputation (Tziner & Rabenu, 2018). However, proponents argue that well-designed PIPs can turn around low-performing employees, clarify roles, and help to restore a productive working relationship if they are part of an effective grievance redressal system (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995).

Employee redressal mechanisms, such as the formal grievance systems, HR mediation, ombudspersons and systems of appeal, are important institutional protections that prevent arbitrary or procedurally unfair managerial actions (Colvin, 2013). For software companies where human capital is the main competitive advantage, the principles of fairness apply directly to talent retention, trust in the organization and employer branding. However, there is not much empirical research on the relationship between PIPs effectiveness and redressal effectiveness in the Indian IT context.

This investigation is especially relevant in the Indian software industry, which accounts for around 7.5% of the nation's GDP and employs more than 5.4 million professionals (NASSCOM, 2023). High staff turnover (20-25% per year), high performance pressure, young age workforce, and heightened employee awareness of their rights as per the forthcoming Labour Code framework (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2020) and Industrial Disputes Act are the features of the sector.

This study aims to address the above mentioned gap by conducting an empirical study on the effect of PIPs in employee redressal outcomes in Indian software companies. Specifically, it aims at (1) measuring the level and forms of PIP use; (2) identifying PIP dimensions with the most important impact on redressal outcomes; (3) examining the role of perceptions of organizational justice as a

moderator of relationships between PIPs and redressal outcomes; and (4) drawing practical recommendations for HR practitioners.

2. Literature Review

PIPs are a structured framework of performance management interventions that are based on identified performance gaps. You can think of them as being based on the theories of expectancy (Vroom, 1964) and goal setting (Locke & Latham, 1990), effective PIPs set clear expectations for performance, offer support in a structured manner, and set measurable time limits. Kuvaas et al.'s (2016) study showed that developmental performance appraisal systems (of which PIPs are a part) are positively related to employee role clarity and motivation if they are perceived as fair and supportive.

But there are also important empirical evidence of implementation deficits. London and Mone (2019) discovered that the majority of managers undertake PIPs reactively, which diminishes their developmental effectiveness. Likewise, Aguinis (2019) found that PIPs often result in a decrease in supervisor trust, employee emotional distress and higher rates of absenteeism, all of which are the opposite of the intended rehabilitative goals.

Employee grievance redressal systems are institutional arrangements of settling employment disputes and ensuring equity in the organization and fulfilment of labour law responsibilities (Lewin, 2005). However, empirical research has consistently shown that the perception of effectiveness of redressal mechanisms is significantly related to employee attitudes of commitment, trust in management, and lower turnover intention (Boroff & Lewin, 1997; Feuille & Delaney, 1992).

In India, the studies conducted by Srivastava (2016) and Bhattacharyya (2019) showed that formal redressal process in IT industry companies are not utilized much because of fear of retaliation, lack of awareness and lack of HR competence. A formal PIP – because of the documentation and management authority – may either discourage or stimulate redressal activity, depending on the organizational culture and procedural design.

The theoretical framework for understanding the effects of PIPs on redressal behavior is organizational justice theory, which includes distributive, procedural and interactional justice

(Colquitt, 2001). There are three types of justice, including distributive justice (fairness of outcomes, e.g., is the PIP threshold equitable?); procedural justice (fairness of process, e.g., do employees have a say in the process?); and interactional justice (quality of interpersonal treatment during the process).

Greenberg (1990) and Folger and Cropanzano (1998) determined that procedural justice is a good predictor of whether employees will follow formal grievance procedures or exit and silence. Subsequent studies by Blader and Tyler (2003) reconfirmed that employees who feel their procedures are unfair in performance appraisal are much more likely to file formal complaints, or to exhibit counterproductive work behaviors or escalate their complaints to outside labor tribunals.

2.4 Research Gaps

Despite a existing literature on PIPs and on grievance mechanisms individually, there is a lack of empirical studies linking both. The existing studies (Ahmad et al., 2020; Sharma & Joshi, 2021) are mostly qualitative, case studies within a single company or carried out within a manufacturing environment. There is hence a very strong method and sectoral need to be fulfilled by the present study by using a large scale quantitative survey design in the Indian IT industry.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

1. H1: PIP transparency is positively associated with employee redressal satisfaction.
2. H2: Supervisor support during the PIP process positively predicts redressal effectiveness.
3. H3: Perceived punitive intent of PIPs negatively affects employee willingness to engage in formal redressal.
4. H4: HR department involvement in PIP design moderates the relationship between PIP implementation and redressal outcomes.
5. H5: There are significant differences in redressal satisfaction across organizational size and PIP frequency.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to explore how PIP characteristics are related to employee redressal outcomes. This design is suitable for testing theoretically-derived hypotheses in a heterogeneous sample in one time period (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

research approach used was explanatory, where the correlation and causal inference could be evaluated based on research analysis using regression.

4.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The target population included full-time employees working in IT/software companies in Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Pune who had experienced or witnessed PIP within a 24-month period. The sampling strategy used was purposive sampling, which was then followed by snowball sampling using HR professional networks and LinkedIn. 207 questionnaires were returned from 240 questionnaires distributed. Seven respondents with large amounts of missing data (>15% missing) were excluded, leaving $N = 200$ respondents for the final analysis sample.

The sample size ($N = 200$) meets the requirement for performing multiple regression analysis with confidence ($N > 10-20$ per predictor variable; Hair et al., 2019) and has sufficient statistical power ($1 - \beta > 0.80$) for detecting medium effect sizes $f^2 = 0.15$ at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4.3 Measurement Instrument

- Section A – Demographic and employment profile (8 items)
- Section B – PIP Experience and Characteristics (12 items, 5-point Likert scale)
- Section C – Organizational Justice Perceptions (10 items, adapted from Colquitt, 2001)
- Section D – Redressal Mechanisms and Outcomes (12 items)
- Section E – Organizational Context and HR Support (6 items)

4.4 Data Analysis Strategy

IBM SPSS software (version 27) was used for data analysis. Means, standard deviations and frequencies were calculated for all variables. Bivariate relationships among the constructs were analyzed using the Pearson correlation. The predictive validity of PIP characteristics on RSS was tested with multiple linear regression (Enter method). Differences among organizational categories were assessed using one-way ANOVA with post hoc Tukey HSD test. All regression models were assumed to be normal (Shapiro-Wilk), to have equal variances (Levene's test), and to lack multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$) based on preliminary tests.

5. Results

5.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sociodemographic and job characteristics of the 200 subjects are indicated in Table 1. Women were under-represented in the sample, with a majority male (58%), age 25-35 (67%) and mid-level (Senior Engineer/Tech Lead: 44%). Most were working for companies that had 1,000-10,000 staff members (54%) and had 4-8 years of work experience (52%). What is significant however, is that 72% had first hand experience of a PIP and 28% of a colleague's PIP.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	116	58.0
	Female	76	38.0
	Non-binary / Prefer not to say	8	4.0
Age Group	20–24 years	22	11.0
	25–30 years	74	37.0
	31–35 years	60	30.0
	36–40 years	30	15.0
	Above 40 years	14	7.0
Designation	Software Engineer / Analyst	56	28.0
	Senior Engineer / Tech Lead	88	44.0
	Manager / Project Manager	40	20.0
	Director / Above	16	8.0
Org. Size	< 1,000 employees	34	17.0
	1,000 – 10,000 employees	108	54.0
	> 10,000 employees	58	29.0
PIP Role	Directly experienced PIP	144	72.0
	Observed colleague on PIP	56	28.0

Source: Primary data collected through structured questionnaire survey (2024)

5.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's α s for all the key constructs are presented in Table 2. The Redressal Satisfaction Score (RSS) had a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 0.87) which showed moderate satisfaction with the redressal outcomes. Perceived Punitive Intent was also moderate (M = 3.67, SD = 0.79), indicating that employees are more inclined to think that PIPs have punitive intent. All scales had a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.78$ – 0.91).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients (N = 200)

Construct	No. of Items	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Cronbach's α
PIP Transparency (PT)	10	3.06	0.93	0.84
Supervisor Support (SS)	8	3.18	0.89	0.81
Perceived Punitive Intent (PPI)	7	3.67	0.79	0.78

Construct	No. of Items	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Cronbach's α
HR Department Involvement (HDI)	6	2.94	0.96	0.82
Procedural Justice (PJ)	8	3.12	0.88	0.86
Redressal Satisfaction Score (RSS)	12	3.24	0.87	0.91

Note. All items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

5.3 Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation coefficient between study variables are presented in Table 3. RSS was significantly positively correlated with PIP Transparency ($r = 0.58, p < 0.001$), Supervisor Support ($r = 0.51, p < 0.001$), HR Involvement ($r = 0.44, p < 0.001$), and Procedural Justice ($r = 0.62, p < 0.001$). There was a significant negative correlation between Perceived Punitive Intent and RSS ($r = -0.49, p < 0.001$). These relationships support the theoretical expectations as expressed in Hypotheses 1–3. No multicollinearity problems were found (inter-predictor correlation is < 0.70).

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PIP Transparency (PT)	1.00	—	—	—	—	—
2. Supervisor Support (SS)	0.52**	1.00	—	—	—	—
3. Perceived Punitive Intent (PPI)	-0.43**	-0.38**	1.00	—	—	—
4. HR Dept. Involvement (HDI)	0.47**	0.41**	-0.36**	1.00	—	—
5. Procedural Justice (PJ)	0.61**	0.54**	-0.52**	0.49**	1.00	—
6. Redressal Satisfaction (RSS)	0.58**	0.51**	-0.49**	0.44**	0.62**	1.00

*Note. ** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Diagonal represents variable self-correlation.*

5.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Simultaneous multiple regression analyses were performed with RSS as the dependent variable and the five constructs related to PIP as independent variables to test Hypotheses 1–4. The standardized regression coefficients, standard errors, t-values and significance are given in Table 4.

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The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(5, 194) = 38.47$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 49.6% of the variance in Redressal Satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.496$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.484$). PIP Transparency emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 6.23$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Procedural Justice ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 5.18$, $p < 0.001$) and Supervisor Support ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 4.97$, $p < 0.01$). Perceived Punitive Intent was a statistically significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.27$, $t = -4.12$, $p < 0.001$) and HR Involvement had a marginally significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.18$, $t = 2.76$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 4: Multiple Regression Results — Predictors of Redressal Satisfaction Score (RSS)

Predictor Variable	β (Standardized)	SE	t-value	Sig. (p)	VIF
PIP Transparency (PT)	0.41	0.063	6.23	< 0.001***	1.82
Supervisor Support (SS)	0.33	0.058	4.97	< 0.001**	1.74
Perceived Punitive Intent (PPI)	-0.27	0.054	-4.12	< 0.001***	1.61
HR Department Involvement (HDI)	0.18	0.061	2.76	0.006*	1.69
Procedural Justice (PJ)	0.34	0.059	5.18	< 0.001***	1.88
Model Summary	$R^2 = 0.496$	Adj. $R^2 = 0.484$	$F(5,194) = 38.47$	$p < 0.001$	—

Note. Dependent variable: Redressal Satisfaction Score (RSS). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

5.5 Group Differences: One-Way ANOVA

One-way ANOVA was used to test hypothesis 5 to determine if there were any significant difference between the RSS and organizational size and PIP frequency. As shown in Table 5, there was a significant main effect of size of the organisation on RSS, $F(2, 197) = 14.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$ (a medium effect). Post-hoc Tukey HSD analysis indicated higher redressal satisfaction among employees of large organizations ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.74$) compared to the employees in mid-sized organizations ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.81$, $p = 0.003$) and small organizations ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$). A significant ANOVA effect was also found for PIP frequency, $F(2, 197) = 9.88$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$, with employees reporting PIPs for the first time expressing significantly less RSS than those in an organization where PIPs were routine.

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA — Redressal Satisfaction by Organizational Size

Group	n	Mean (M)	SD	F-statistic	p-value	η^2
Small Org. (< 1,000 emp.)	34	2.76	0.91	14.32	< 0.001	0.13
Mid-sized (1,000–10,000)	108	3.19	0.81	—	—	—
Large Org. (> 10,000 emp.)	58	3.71	0.74	—	—	—
Total	200	3.24	0.87	—	—	—

Note. Post-hoc Tukey HSD: Small vs. Large: $p < 0.001$; Mid vs. Large: $p = 0.003$; Small vs. Mid: $p = 0.021$.

5.6 Developmental vs. Punitive PIP Perception: Group Comparison

An extra independent samples t-test was conducted comparing RSS scores between those who saw the PIP as mostly developmental ($n = 96$, 48%) and those who saw the PIP as mostly punitive ($n = 104$, 52%). Results showed that there was a highly significant difference between the developmental perception group and the punitive perception group with higher mean scores for the former ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.69$) and the latter ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.81$) $t(198) = 9.84$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.39$ (large effect size). This finding provides strong support for Hypothesis 3, and highlights the importance of PIP framing for downstream redressal behaviour.

Table 6: Redressal Satisfaction by PIP Perception Type

PIP Perception	n	Mean (M)	SD	t-statistic	p-value	Cohen's d
Developmental PIP	96	4.12	0.69	9.84	< 0.001	1.39
Punitive PIP	104	2.78	0.81	—	—	—

Note. Independent samples t-test, two-tailed. Effect size interpreted as large (Cohen, 1988).

6. Discussion

The results of this study contribute to the existing knowledge in several, empirically significant ways regarding the redressal dynamics in software organizations that employ PIP. Results for the regression test provide strong support for Hypothesis 1, confirming that transparency in PIP is the strongest predictor for satisfaction with redressal. This is consistent with research in the organizational justice literature that suggests procedural voice is an important basis for perceived

legitimacy (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Providing a clear, documented rationale for performance expectations, feedback, and escalation processes will help employees to help themselves by enabling them to engage constructively with the redressal processes instead of leaving before partway through or engaging in passive dissent.

Supervisor support (H2 confirmed) demonstrates the central role of the immediate manager's role in PIP outcomes. Leaders who demonstrate care and concern, have regular check-ins throughout the PIP process and promote HR involvement, foster a safe psychological climate for employees to consider raising a grievance formally without facing consequences. This corroborates Eisenberger et al (2002) supervisor support model and the evidence from Noe et al (2017) regarding the effectiveness of the manager-as-coach in performance management.

The negative association between perceived punitive intent and redressal engagement (H3 confirmed) highlights an alarming paradox; employees most in need of protection by the institution of redressal (those on adversarially framed PIPs) are the least likely to seek redressal. This "chilling effect" on the use of formal grievance mechanisms has implications for organisational equity and compliance with the law, especially in the era of greater protection of workers under the new labour law regime in India (GOI, 2021).

The HR department involvement variable, although significant, had a relatively small beta coefficient, indicating that it is the quality and timing of HR involvement that is more important than the formal involvement of HR. When HR is only used as a point-of-failure evaluator and not as a proactive design partner in the construction of PIP, the full effects of any redressal benefits derived from the formal PIP are unlikely to be realized.

H5 is supported by the ANOVA results which showed systematic organizational size differences in redressal satisfaction. Generally, the bigger the size of the software company, the more institutionalized the HR infrastructure, the more there are dedicated grievance officers, legal compliance teams and anonymised escalation systems, which all help to lower the structures and processes that make effective redress hard to achieve. Smaller companies, on the other hand, may use informal conflict resolution methods, which lack the impartiality and rigor of a formal process.

The practically most important result of this study is the large effect size ($d = 1.39$) between developmental and punitive PIP perceptions and redressal outcomes. The results indicate that perceptual reframing, which could be facilitated by communication design, management training and PIP documentation language, could provide significant improvement in redressal satisfaction without requiring structural changes, and thus present a very cost-effective intervention pathway for organisations.

7. Implications for Practice and Policy

7.1 Managerial Implications

HR managers and organizational leaders must ensure that PIPs are framed developmentally in documentation, manager communication and employee language. All PIP documents should contain clear sections for support resources, escalation rights, HR contact information and the ability to modify the PIP if there is interim feedback. Structured training is needed for supervisors in the administration of PIP around procedural communication, active listening and facilitation of redressal pathways.

7.2 Organizational Design Implications

Organizations, especially those with less institutionalised HR processes, should have formal, standing redressal procedures tailored to the context of PIPs, including time frames, impartial review panels and anonymous reporting mechanisms. As suggested by the present authors, a formal PIP-Redressal Interface Policy (PRIP) would rationalise the relationship between performance intervention and grievance rights, minimising ad hoc escalation and legal liability.

7.3 Policy Implications

It is suggested to take an initiative by the regulatory bodies and industry associations like NASSCOM and the Ministry of Labour to provide advisory documentation frameworks requiring disclosure of redressal rights in the PIP documentation. Organizational practices that were found to be most effective in this study may be given legal support by the inclusion of PIP transparency standards in the Industrial Relations Code (2020) and proposed National Employment Policy.

8. Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of caveats to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the cross-sectional approach does not allow for causal inference; longitudinal studies of PIP cohorts over the entire redressal process would provide more in-depth analysis. Secondly, though the sample was representative, it was taken from Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune which are three urban IT hubs, and it may not be representative of software firms in other cities or globally distributed software teams. Third, the self-reported answers could have been affected by social desirability bias, especially for items related to the supervisor. Future research should incorporate survey data with HR department records, legal filing data, and qualitative interviews with HR Business Partners and employee relations officers.

Future research directions are: longitudinal study of PIP-redressal linkages; comparative studies of PIP practices across countries; experimental design studies on the effect of PIP documentation language on redressal propensity; and studies of digital tools used for performance management and their implications for procedural justice.

9. Conclusion

The study offers firm empirical findings which suggest that the intent and design of Performance Improvement Programs significantly influence the level of employee involvement with the organizational grievance redressal mechanisms in Indian software industry. PIP transparency, supervisor support and procedural justice were the main facilitators of redressal satisfaction and perceived punitive framing the main barrier. The fact that there is a 48.2% higher rate of redressal satisfaction for employees who are on developmentally framed PIPs, compared to those on punitively framed PIPs, is reason enough to invest in the communication design of PIPs, and the training of managers.

In an increasingly challenging software industry, grappling with pressure to perform, shifting demographics and changing expectations of employees' rights, principled, transparent, and human-centric PIPs are not just a good practice for HR — they are a strategic imperative for the entire

organization. This work not only enriches the theory, but also provides a practical framework for how to achieve this integration.

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