

# **An employee voice framework as a tool to compare employees and managers viewpoints: the case of the Italian National Research Council**

Armando Calabrese <sup>a</sup>, Roberta Costa <sup>a</sup>, Stefania Giuffrida <sup>b</sup>, Tamara Menichini <sup>c\*</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Department of Enterprise Engineering, University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, Via del Politecnico 1, 00133 Rome, Italy*

*<sup>b</sup>Italian National Research Council*

*<sup>c</sup>Industrial and Mechanical Engineering, University of Rome “Niccolò Cusano”, Via Don Carlo Gnocchi 3, 00166 Rome, Italy*

## **Abstract**

Ever more organizations, both private and public, are placing a greater importance on employee engagement as a means of more effective organizational decision-making. Forms of involvement in the decision processes (e.g. employee voice) have a great impact on employee motivation, job satisfaction and commitment to an organization. Besides, when employees believe they have opportunities for voice in decision-making, they contribute with information and ideas enhancing organizational learning and improvement.

This study proposes an “employee voice (EV) framework” for stimulating employee participation in strategic decision-making. The framework employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to compare employees and managers viewpoints. The paper concludes with a real case study application to the Italian National Research Council (NRC), the largest research organization in Italy. The application of the EV framework concluded with the formulation of various proposals for the design of a new performance evaluation and incentive system.

## **Keywords**

Employee engagement, employee voice, strategic decision-making, performance evaluation, incentive system

## **1. Introduction**

In an ever more dynamic economy, companies necessitate engaged employees in order to gain and maintain competitive advantage. Indeed, employee engagement increases employee and customer

satisfaction, customer loyalty, productivity, profitability and reduces employee turnover (Harter et al., 2002; Menguc et al., 2013). For this reason, employee engagement is part of the strategic management of high performance organization, which pay always more attention to human resource initiatives and management styles (Bakker, 2017). For this reason, top management should integrate drivers of engagement with strategic goals of the organization, fostering participation, loyalty and talent retention of employees (Taneja et al., 2015). Moreover, forms of engagement in the decision-making processes make employee activity more motivating and more satisfying, as they create the conditions for greater inspiration and, in turn, contribute to their well-being (Boxall et al., 2015).

Some studies suggest that there is a direct relationship between employee engagement and employee voice (EV) (e.g. Rees et al., 2013), defined as the opportunity for employees to speak up important issues and propose ideas (Dyne et al., 2003). EV represents “a feeling on the part of staff that they are able to express their views to managers in an open environment and that management will provide support to allow this to happen” (Wilkinson et al., 2004). Indeed, EV should support the decision-making process of top management with the aim to improve work organization quality and productivity (Dundon et al., 2004), as well as triggering organizational learning, innovation and improvement (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). Among a large number of EV mechanisms (e.g. trade unions, suggestion boxes), Armstrong (2009) states that EV can take the form of a joint consultation involving top managers and employee representatives, who meet regularly to exchange point of views, share knowledge and deal with issues of common interest.

Based on the foregoing premise, this study proposes a new EV framework for encouraging EV and employee engagement in strategic decision-making. The framework offers an instrument for employees and managers to exchange point of views, employing both qualitative (i.e. World Café method) and quantitative methods (questionnaires, gap analysis and comparative matrices). The EV framework application gives insight into which employee proposals should be implemented as they result the most important for employees but also feasible for the top-management.

The next section of the paper provides a brief review of the literature on employee engagement in decision-making. Section 3 discusses the direct connection between EV and employee engagement. The EV framework proposed in the paper is illustrated in detail in section 4. Section 5 provides an illustrative application to the Italian National Research Council (NRC). Finally, section 7 summarizes and concludes the study.

## **2. Employee engagement in decision-making**

The success of an organization and, sometimes, even its survival, may depend on an effective bottom-up communication - between employees and management - of ideas and information that could be relevant for solving problems or seizing opportunities. In fact, often to make the right decisions or identify a possible problem top managers need information that only the employees at the bottom level of the organization have knowledge about (Morrison, 2011). Nevertheless, employees are not always encouraged or facilitated in communicating potentially important ideas to management (Milliken et al., 2003; Perlow and Williams, 2003). Actually, involving employees with impact can be one of the factors of successful decision-making, because “engaged” employees improve the extent of their ‘discretionary effort’, are more inclined to align their objectives with organizational goals and can boost strategic decision-making (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008).

Indeed, employee engagement is a basic variable affecting behaviours and approaches to job (Christian et al., 2011). There are several definitions of employee engagement but a leading strand is the postulation that voluntarily collaborative undertakings of employees can generate eligible outcomes for both organisations and employees (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Employee engagement is a rational and emotional commitment to corporate objectives. It means “being positively present during the performance of work by willingly contributing intellectual effort and experiencing both positive emotions and meaningful connections to others” (Alfes et al., 2010). Such “positive emotions and meaningful connections to others” allow connection of different organizational players enabling the sharing of knowledge, information, influence and resources and,

accordingly, a systematic connection between top managers and employees. Indeed, employee engagement is an outcome “that flows from the practice of good employment relations” (Purcell 2010, p. 8). As a structured web of relationships between top management and employees, employee engagement is important for improving strategic decision-making (Kim et al., 2009).

An established basic of effective employee engagement is the listening to EV, because being listened and considered is one of the critical antecedents of engagement. Recent literature shows a link between employee engagement and organisational performance (Rich et al., 2010; Christian et al., 2011) and between employee engagement and EV (Rees et al., 2013), but few studies focus on how implement employee engagement by means of practical tools or frameworks.

### **3. Employee voice and employee engagement**

The term “upward communication” defines a passage of information from lower to higher members of an organization (Athanassiades, 1973; Glauser, 1984), and it includes any form of communication between employees and managers without necessarily implying employee engagement. EV, instead, defines an upward communication that has the objective of influencing the organizational decision-making process (Morrison, 2011; Dyne et al., 2003; Donaghey et al., 2014). EV is a broad term used with slightly different meanings in many disciplines, from the human resource management, to economy and organizational behaviour (e.g. expression of individual dissatisfaction through grievance procedure, expression of collective dissatisfaction by trade unions). In this paper, it refers to the communication of strategically relevant inputs for organizational learning, innovation and improvement (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). EV encompasses “all types of opportunities where employee can have their say and exert some influence over work place decisions” (Anyango et al. 2015; Boxall and Purcell, 2011).

Various studies show that the presence of EV mechanisms supports employee engagement (e.g. Rees et al., 2013). For example, Truss et al. (2006) affirm that "one of the main drivers of

engagement is employees having the opportunity to feed their views upwards", suggesting there is a link between EV and employee engagement.

Farndale et al. (2011) argue that EV allows employees the opportunity to communicate upward their opinions and generates in them the belief that their proposals are valued, creating a level of respect towards the organization management. The authors conclude that there is a direct connection between the EV and the development of employee trust in management, if the management will take into serious consideration employee proposals and respect commitments to them. In addition, other authors explain that opportunities for voice can encourage employee positive attitudes towards management (Dietz et al., 2009), because employees feel recognized and listened to (Korsgaard et al., 1995).

Based on the previous discussion, EV mechanisms can improve employee engagement, employee trust in management and commitment to the organization. For this reason, this study proposes a new EV framework to encourage and support EV and employee participation in strategic decision-making.

#### **4. Employee voice (EV) framework**

The EV framework comprises six steps, which should be applied to a specific subject of the company strategic decision-making for which employees have opportunities to express their point of view and thus contribute to select proposals for implementation.

##### *Step 1: Setting the context for EV framework implementation*

The EV framework begins by defining the context for implementation. To this aim, top management is asked to conduct an in-depth reflection on the purpose of the EV framework application within the company's strategic decision-making. This analysis allows identifying a sample of internal stakeholders (employees and managers) to involve in the next steps. Sampling activities could be conducted using personnel databases. In this case, employees and managers

could be randomly selected by profile, length of service, geographical area, etc. Alternatively, employees and managers could be called to self-apply by replying to an invitation email. A specific training initiative for employees and managers could be implemented, in order to build a shared language around the aims of EV framework conveying the idea that employees have the opportunity for voice in the company's strategic decision-making.

### *Step 2: World café meetings*

World café is a structured method to conduct conversation around questions that matter to participants' life, work or community (Brown and Isaacs, 2002). The integration of world café within the EV framework is aimed at providing employees with a concrete opportunity for voice in the context of company's strategic decision-making. Indeed, world café meetings ensure an unconventional experience in which creativity and involvement can make the difference giving participants the opportunity to contribute to innovative thinking and improvements in their working life (Burke and Sheldon, 2010).

The format of world café method is flexible and easily adaptable to different circumstances. Nevertheless, the organizers have to take into account some principles and guidelines for the world café design and implementation (e.g. Schieffer et al., 2004a; 2004b; TWCCF, 2015). In particular, the creation of a welcoming atmosphere evoking a feeling of informality and intimacy is crucial to stimulate the involvement of participants (Sheridan et al., 2010) and it can be particularly important when world café meetings are organized within the workplace. Availability of beverages and snacks, a casual arrangements of tables and chairs around the space, the use of round tables are all elements that help participants feel relaxed enough to talk openly on world café topics and thus encourage the everyone's contribution.

World café conversations have to be structured in different rounds during which all participants have the role of table host or traveller. Travellers change discussion table at each round to carry the essence of conversations and cross-pollinate ideas. Table hosts sit to the same table during all the

rounds, they welcome new arrivals and share the key points of conversations hosted at their table. As previous studies show, the more active is the dialogue process, the more positive is the perception of participants about the quality of the process (e.g. Takahashi et al., 2014). For this reasons, each discussion round has to be introduced by a question that invite to the reasoning, to investigate, to discover new horizons and to question every aspect of a topic, in order to bring out useful and unexpected ideas. In particular, the question that introduce the first round should allow participants to view themselves into a future and ideal situation in which the world café issues they are talking about, are overcome. This visionary question stimulates the exploration of new perspectives and possibilities challenging preconceptions. Then, further in-depth questions for the introduction of the other two rounds should lead participants to discuss the arguments emerged in the first round, under a more concrete perspective.

Each world café meeting concludes with a plenary session during which the ideas and the reflections emerged during the discussion rounds are shared among all the participants, in order to stimulate collective knowledge and creativity.

### *Step 3: Collection of EV proposals*

Findings of world café consist of a series of ideas and reflections which could be used to develop actions in different kind of situations (e.g. Chan and Chen, 2015; Stöckigt et al., 2013). Hence, the present step is aimed at collecting employee ideas emerged during the world café conversations (step 2) and structure them as potential EV proposals in order to facilitate the application of the next steps (Steps 4 to 6). In case of a large amount of employees' ideas resulting from world café, it could be useful a structured approach (e.g. Delphi method) to achieve consensus on the choice of EV proposals.

### *Step 4: Evaluation of EV proposals*

The step 4 regards the evaluation of EV proposals collected in the previous step. Each proposal have to be evaluated in terms of importance (I) and feasibility (F). To do this, a short questionnaire should be structured and submitted to all employees selected in step 1. Also managers are asked to evaluate the importance and feasibility of EV proposals. In the survey, respondents have to judge the importance (I) of EV proposals on a six-point Likert scale, with one representing “no importance” to six representing “very high importance”. Respondent have also to judge the feasibility of EV proposals on a six-point Likert scale ranging from one representing “no feasibility” to six representing “very high feasibility”.

#### *Step 5: Prioritization of EV proposals for implementation*

The step 5 prescribes the creation of “IF matrix” (see an example in Fig. 1 in section 5) as a tool to determine priorities for EV proposals’ implementation, based on the comparison between employee and managers’ viewpoints. The horizontal axis shows feasibility as expressed by managers (F<sub>m</sub>). The vertical axis represents importance as expressed by employees (I<sub>e</sub>). The EV proposals have to be placed within the IF matrix according to the mean levels of feasibility (F<sub>m</sub>) and importance (I<sub>e</sub>). “IF matrix” has four quadrants. The bottom left contains EV proposals of lower importance and lower feasibility; hence, these EV proposals have low priorities for implementation. The bottom right contains EV proposals with a larger feasibility but of lower importance, so these EV proposals could be implemented in the future but they have not greatest priorities for the present. The top left contains EV proposals of greater importance but with lower feasibility, so it might be better to focus on EV proposal with a greater feasibility first, as those placed in the top right. The EV proposals placed in the upper right quadrant are should be implemented with the highest priority, as they are the most important for employees and, at the same time, the most feasible for managers.

#### *Step 6: Gap analysis*



In addition, other two matrices should be calculated, in order to compare the importance and feasibility of EV proposals, as evaluated by employees and by managers. The alignment analysis is based on the IF matrices that compare the importance (I) and feasibility (F) of EV proposals, as evaluated by employees and by managers. By comparing importance and feasibility as evaluated by employees, it is possible to obtain the “employee IF matrix” (Fig. 2). Similarly, by comparing importance and feasibility as evaluated by managers, it is possible to obtain the “manager IF matrix” (Fig. 3).

By overlapping these two matrices, it is possible to quantify gaps between the evaluations of employees and managers about importance and feasibility of EV proposals. An example of gap quantification is shown in the application section (Fig. 4 in section 5). Besides, the analysis allows identifying the most critical EV proposals for which employees and managers have conflicting points of view about importance and feasibility. Any misalignment between employee and manager viewpoints highlights a potential conflicting area. Therefore, based on the gap analysis findings, the EV framework supports the development of an action plan for overcoming misalignments and solving potential conflicts.

## **5. An illustrative application of the Employee voice (EV) framework: the case of the Italian National Research Council (NRC)**

In Italy, national laws commit public organizations to introduce an institutional performance measurement system for their employees, which must be integrated with other different macro-processes of the organization, such as the strategic planning, the management audit and efficient instruments. As public research organization, the NRC - Italian National Research Council - must comply with the law, due to its public mission, but it is also strongly interested to be flexible and high responsive, in order to acquire funds from outside and to remain innovative and competitive. Indeed, it is the largest multidisciplinary research organization in Italy, with seven thematic Departments (devoted to macro-areas of scientific and technological research) and a network of

about one hundred research institutes, located all over the national territory, with more than 8,000 employees devoted to research, technical and administrative issues.

For these reasons, in the last years, NRC has undertaken a process of organizational innovation, which involve new approaches for the definition of the performance evaluation and incentive system to apply to its employees. In particular, NRC financed several projects to innovate internal managerial processes, giving opportunity to his employees to propose to the managing board organizational innovations in many sector. One of this project concerned the proposal of an action plan for introducing a new performance evaluation and incentive system for the NRC employees, strongly shared with the personnel. Therefore, following the six steps of the above-described EV framework, NRC carried out an activity aiming at collecting employee voices regarding the individual performance evaluation and incentive system.

#### *Step 1: Setting the context*

An introductory seminar have been organized, as a training section, both for employees and managers, to disseminate information about the context (law compliances), the current methodologies for evaluating the employees' performance in a public organization, the future challenges of the performance management. The seminar has been conceived to give the opportunity the participants to feel part of a real change in the strategic decision-making of the organization. All the employees have been invited to participate the seminar also by a streaming conference. Successively, NRC employees have been classified according to their professional profiles (junior researchers, senior researchers, technicians, clerks) and a sample of about 30 subjects for each category have been selected on the base of geographical, gender, age, scientific areas criteria.

#### *Step 2: World café organization*

NRC organized 5 world café meetings in different regions, one for each professional profile, inviting the participant sample previously identified. Each world café has been prepared according to the world café guidelines (Brown and Isaacs, 2002), but adapted to the aims and the specific characteristics of NRC. The different rounds of discussion have concerned the performance evaluation criteria and the incentives for the improvement of work activity, as wished by the participants. Finally, a plenary session has been used to consolidate and to share the ideas and proposals emerged during the discussion rounds. The outputs of the world café meetings have been analyzed independently, in order to gain the employee voice on the performance evaluation and incentive system for each professional profile. For the aim of this paper, we will present only the results for the "senior researchers" (SR), as it provides a sufficient example of application of the proposed methodology.

#### *Step 3: Collection of proposals*

At the end of the SR world café, 31 evaluation criteria and 9 incentive proposals have been collected and shared among the participants.

#### *Step 4: Evaluation of EV proposals*

All the NRC employees with the SR professional profile have been asked to answer to a short questionnaire, distributed through the intranet portal of the organization, in order to have a controlled access based on the employee register numbers. Each question referred to the 31 evaluation criteria and the 9 incentive proposals, emerged during the world café (see Appendix for the detailed description). All the NRC SRs have been asked to evaluate these criteria and proposal in terms of importance (I) and feasibility (F) on a six-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "no importance" ("no feasibility" correspondently) and 6 representing "very high importance" ("very high feasibility" correspondently). The rate of response has been of 22%. In addition, the Research Managers (RM), hierarchically responsible of the SR's activities and performance, have been asked

to evaluate the importance and feasibility of 40 proposals (criteria and incentives). The rate of response for the RM has been of 43%.

#### *Step 5: Prioritization of EV proposals for implementation*

Figure 1 is the “IF matrix” based on the comparison between SR's and RM's viewpoints. The horizontal axis shows feasibility as expressed by the RMs. The vertical axis represents importance as expressed by SRs. Each point represents the average value of the responses on the level of importance for SRs and the level of feasibility for RMs respect to the evaluation criteria (ball) or the incentive proposals (triangle). The evaluation criteria and incentive proposals placed in the upper right quadrant are the most important for SRs and the most feasible for RMs. For example, point E23 corresponds to the evaluation criteria *"Annual evaluation criteria and indicators must be communicated to the interested SRs at the beginning of the year"*, judged the most important and one of the most feasible criterion to be adopted in the future evaluation system for SR's employee at NRC. Point I2 corresponds, instead, to the incentive proposal *"An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to gain human resources for the group"*, considered one of the most important incentive for SRs and the most feasible proposal for RMs. According to this matrix, E23 and I2 should be implemented with the highest priority by the NRC. In the bottom left quadrant there are the evaluation criteria and incentive proposals less important and less feasibility (i.e. E5 and I9), so with the lowest priority for NRC. In the remaining two quadrants (bottom right and top left), there are evaluation criteria and incentives judged more feasible but less important and more important but less feasible, respectively.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

#### *Step 6: Gap analysis*

In order to compare the importance and feasibility of each criterion and proposal, as evaluated by SRs and by RMs, the “SR's IF matrix” (Figure 2) and the "RM's IF matrix” (Figure 3) have been created. The comparison between these two matrices is the alignment analysis between the viewpoints of SRs and RMs on the same criterion or incentive proposal.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The overlapping of these two matrices gives information on the distance between the position of SRs and RMs on the same issues. Figure 4 and Figure 5 provide a quantification of these gaps, respectively in terms of importance and feasibility. Positive values indicate the evaluation criteria and the incentive proposals considered more important (or more feasible) for the RMs; vice versa, negative values point out aspects considered more important for the SRs.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

This analysis allows identifying the most critical proposals for which SRs and RMs have conflicting points of view about importance and feasibility. Starting from this information, NRC has the opportunity to define an evaluation performance and incentive system probably more acceptable by the employees and considered feasible by the managing board.

## **6. Conclusions**

In today's highly competitive global economy, most successful organizations increasingly rely on the competences and talents of their employees. Employee engagement benefits both employees and employers by improving customer and employee satisfaction, customer loyalty, productivity,

profitability and employee retention (Harter et al., 2002; Menguc et al., 2013). Moreover, engaged employees are more inclined to align their objectives with organizational goals and their contributions can boost strategic decision-making, especially if top managers need information that only the employees at the bottom level of the organization have knowledge about (Morrison, 2011). Recent literature shows a link between employee engagement and EV (Rees et al., 2013), but few studies focus on how utilize EV mechanisms to favour employee participation in decision-making. Following this lead, his paper proposes an EV framework to encourage and support employee participation in strategic decision-making. Based on the comparison of employee and manager viewpoints, the framework employs both qualitative (i.e. world café method) and quantitative methods (questionnaires, gap analysis and comparative matrices).

The paper concludes with an illustrative application of the EV framework to the Italian NRC. Due to national compliances, public organizations must introduce an institutional performance measurement system for their employees. Following the six steps of the EV framework, NRC carried out an activity aimed at collecting EV proposals regarding the design of a new performance evaluation and incentive system.

The world café meetings (first step of the EV framework) offered NRC employees a positive experience of collective creativity and shared learning. The outcomes of world café were then organized in EV proposals. The EV framework allowed setting priorities for EV proposals, giving insight into which ones should be implemented as they result the most important for employees but also feasible for the top-management. A further analysis of misalignments between employee and manager viewpoints gave insight into which are the most critical EV proposals to be implemented. This gap analysis can support the future development of an action plan for overcoming and solving potential conflicts.

Starting from this information, NRC has the opportunity to define an evaluation performance and incentive system probably more acceptable by the employees and considered feasible by the managing board.

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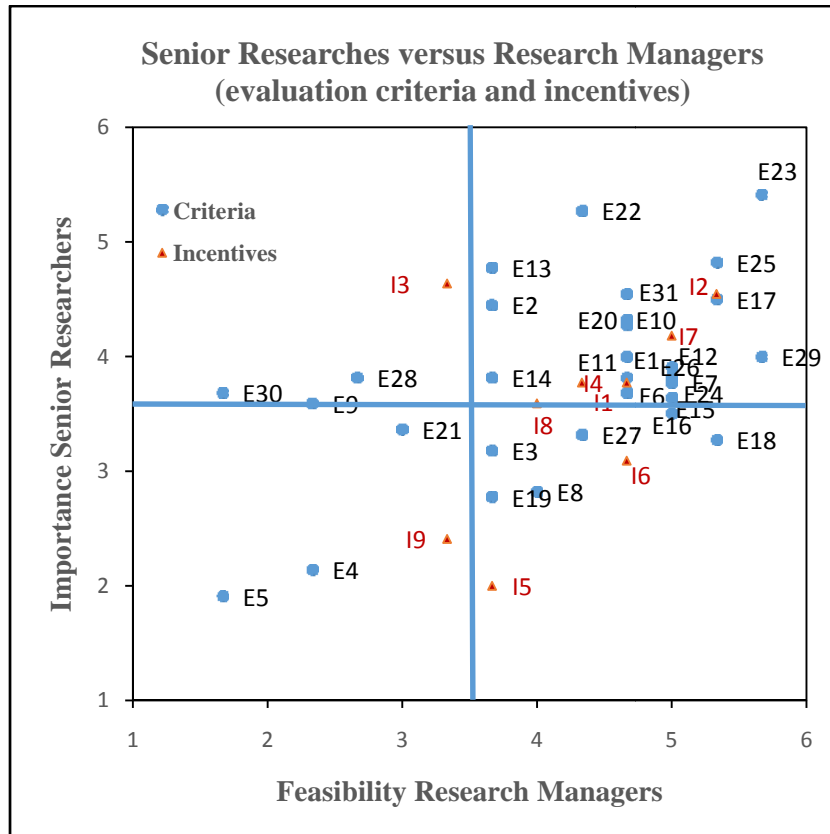
### ***Appendix: EV proposals collected at the Italian National Council of Research***

- E1. The evaluation of the SR must be based on research production
- E2. SR's soft skills must be evaluated
- E3. SR's soft skills must be evaluated by the RM of the Department
- E4. SR's soft skills must be evaluated by the Scientific Council of the Department
- E5. SR's soft skills must be evaluated by the other SR of the Department
- E6. SR's soft skills must be evaluated by the other research colleagues
- E7. SR must be evaluated on the third mission activities
- E8. SR must be evaluated on the third mission activities by the Scientific Council of the Department
- E9. The self-financing capability must be evaluated (both financed projects and proposals submitted)
- E10. The complexity of the managed resources must be considered (dependent personnel, amount of funds, etc.)
- E11. Legal compliances should be not evaluated
- E12. Correspondence between carried out activities and organization strategy must be evaluated
- E13. SR must be evaluated for the professional growth capability of his collaborators
- E14. SR must be evaluated for the management capability of funds
- E15. SR must be evaluated for other specific *ad personam* roles achieved for his competences
- E16. The self-financing capability must be evaluated on annual base (for plurennial projects)
- E17. The SR's network capability among his collaborators must be evaluated
- E18. The SR's capability to stay in strategic scientific/technological clusters must be evaluated
- E19. The frequency of leading roles in research project is a good performance indicator for SR
- E20. For assessing the self-financing capability, the Departmental funds assigned to the SR's institute must be also considered
- E21. Managerial evaluation criteria must be more important than scientific criteria
- E22. SR must participate in the revision of evaluation criteria and indicators
- E23. Annual evaluation criteria and indicators must be communicated to the interested SRs at the beginning of the year
- E24. An annual audit with all the internal stakeholders must be organized to assess the ongoing performance
- E25. The results of the evaluation must be communicated to SRs promptly and with transparency
- E26. The results of the evaluation must be communicated by an individual meeting between the SRs and the evaluator commission
- E27. Annual objectives (with indicators and targets) must be assigned to SRs at the beginning of the year
- E28. The objectives assigned to SRs must be agreed with the RMs
- E29. The evaluation process of SRs should consider a plurennial timeline
- E30. In case of plurennial evaluation, an annual assessment should be organized between SR and RM or SM and the board of the directors
- E31. The outcome of the evaluation must be the improvement of critical areas
- I1. The annual evaluation of the SRs must be linked to the incentive system
- I2. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to gain human resources for the group
- I3. Selections for new human resources must be managed directly by the SR's institute
- I4. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to gain new instrument for the SR's institute
- I5. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to obtain a public mention
- I6. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to have a privileged access to internal research funds

- I7. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to have an increase of annual budget for institute projects
- I8. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to have an increase of annual share of award resources
- I9. An incentive for SRs must be the opportunity to meet regularly the CEO and the President.

SR = Senior Research; RM = Research Manager

**Figures**



**Figure 1.** IF matrix for evaluation criteria and incentives proposals, comparing SRs and RMs viewpoints

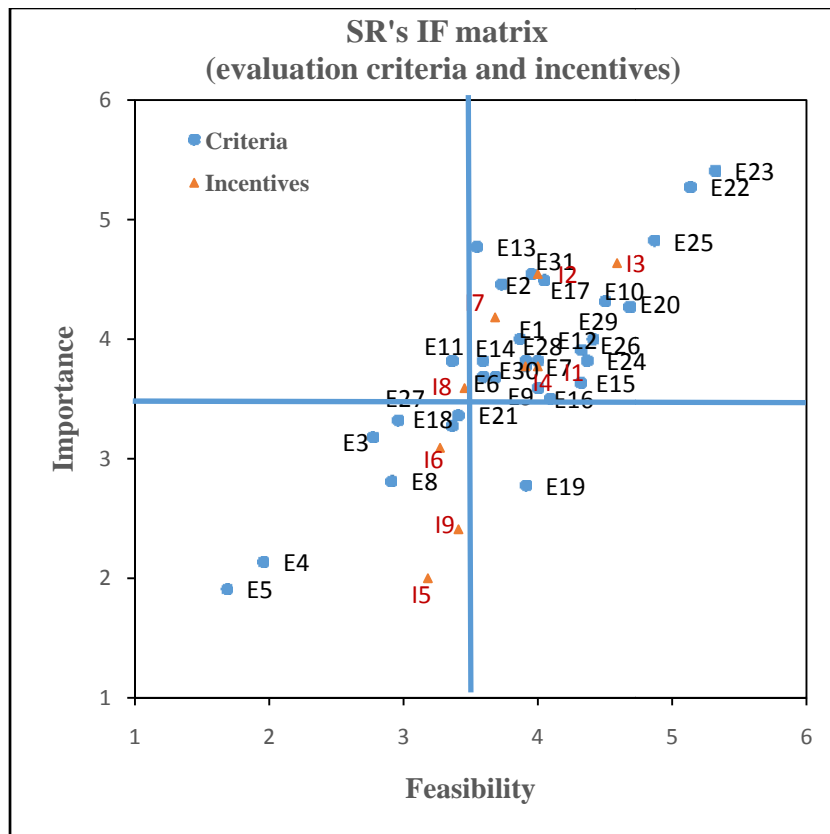


Figure 2. IF matrix for evaluation criteria and incentives proposals, in the SRs' viewpoint

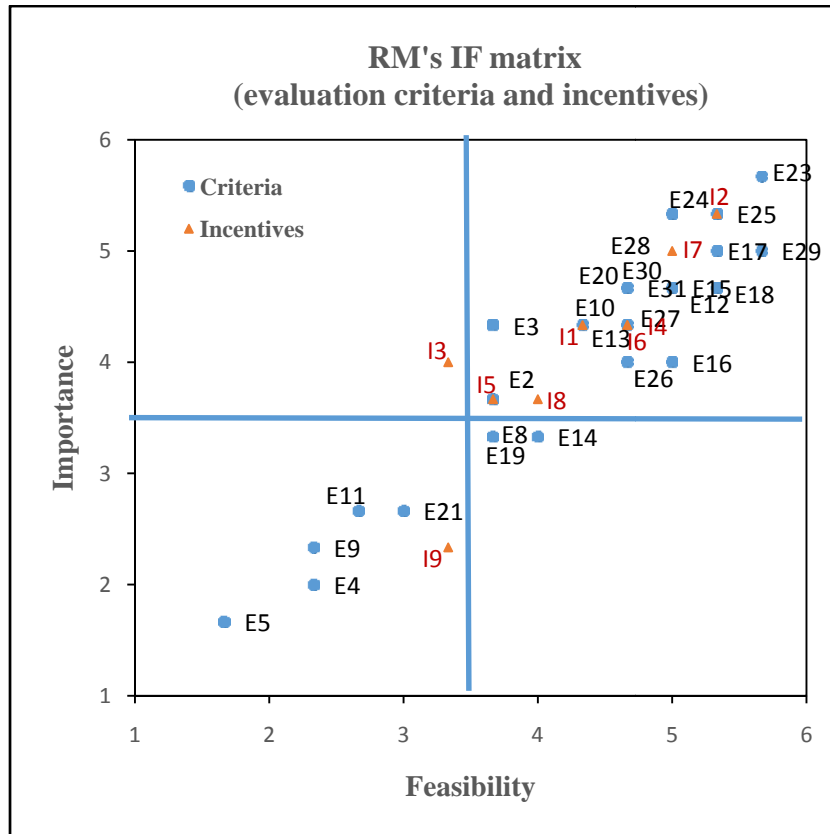
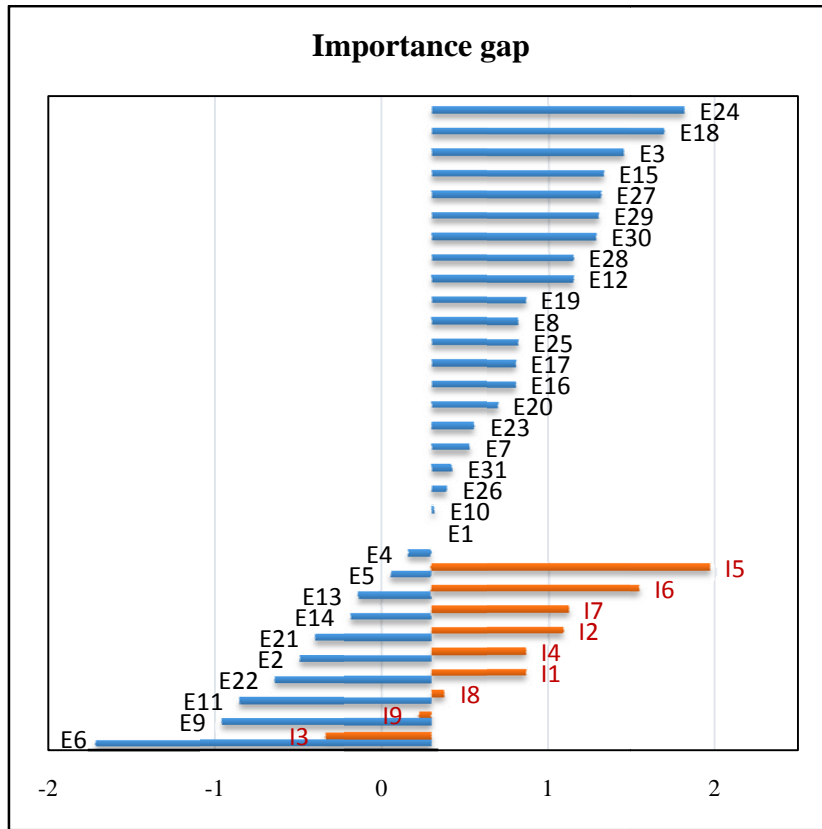
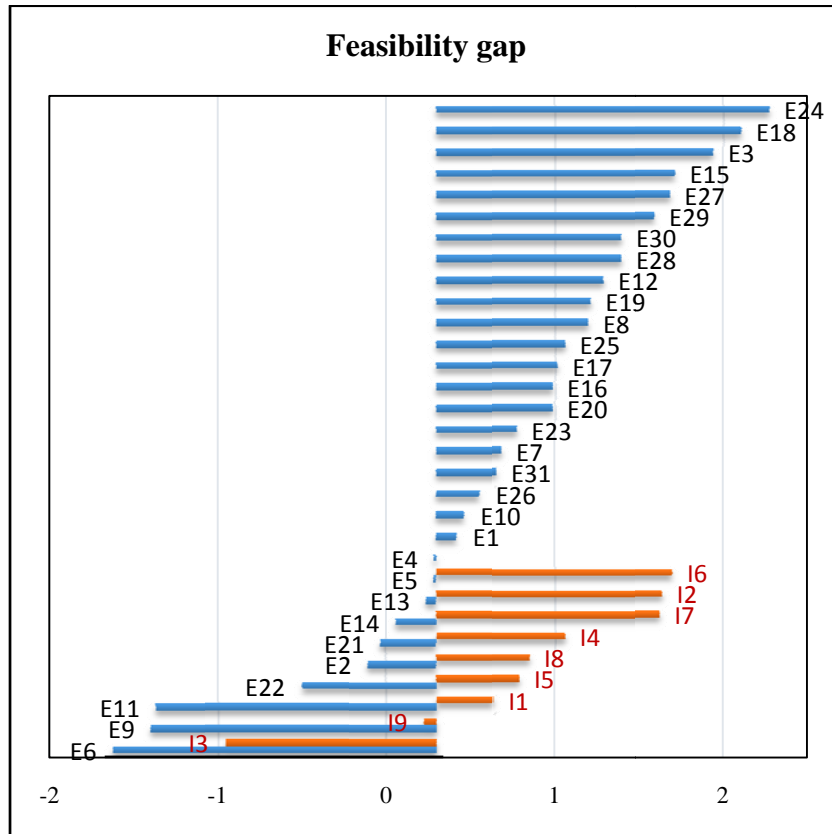


Figure 3. IF matrix for evaluation criteria and incentives proposals, in the RMs' viewpoint



**Figure 4.**Gaps between SRs and RMs viewpoints on the level of importance of evaluation criteria and incentive proposals, ranked by size of alignment gap.



**Figure 5.**Gapsbetween SRs and RMs viewpoints on the level of feasibilityof evaluation criteria and incentive proposals, ranked by size of alignment gap.