

*RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NOTE /  
NOTE SUR LA RECHERCHE ET LES MÉTHODES*

PERFORMANCE STUDIES: THE MISSING LINK?

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**Abstract:** Typically, a good measurement strategy to support results-based management includes both ongoing performance measures and periodic evaluations. It is argued that this is a too limited set of measurement tools, resulting, not infrequently, in less useful and costly ongoing performance measures. It is proposed that, in addition to ongoing performance measures and periodic evaluations, an alternative measurement tool called a performance study should be used in many situations, and further, that in a number of circumstances, performance studies should replace specific ongoing performance measures.

**Résumé:** Typiquement, une bonne stratégie de mesure du rendement visant à appuyer la gestion axée sur les résultats comprend à la fois des mesures du rendement continues et des évaluations périodiques. On soutient qu'il s'agit d'un ensemble trop limité d'outils de mesure qui résulte, trop souvent, en des mesures continues du rendement dispendieuses et moins utiles. Il est proposé qu'en plus des mesures continues du rendement et des évaluations périodiques, l'on utilise dans plusieurs situations un outil de mesure de rechange appelé « étude sur le rendement ». On propose également que, dans certaines circonstances, les études sur le rendement devraient remplacer des mesures spécifiques du rendement continues.

■ Ongoing performance measurement involving the collection of data on performance indicators on a regular (weekly, monthly, or quarterly) basis is now a fixture in public sector management. In many jurisdictions, including the Canadian federal government, it is a requirement. The OECD has tracked the ups and downs in performance management for many years and has recently issued a review of how its member states are doing in modernizing government over the past two decades, including progress made in enhancing public

sector performance. As their study suggests, many challenges for performance management remain (OECD, 2005).

It is reasonably well accepted that in addition to ongoing performance measurement, complementary policy and program evaluations are usually needed in order to measure and report on performance in a more comprehensive manner (Mayne, 2001; McDavid & Hawthorne, 2005; OECD, 2005). Evaluations can be used to measure more difficult aspects of performance and to deal with questions of attribution—the extent to which it was the policy or program that contributed to an observed outcome compared with other factors. The recommended performance measurement strategy is often a reasoned combination of ongoing performance measures and periodic evaluations.

As noted, many challenges to implementing results-based management remain (Mayne, in press; OECD, 2005), and some observers argue that ongoing performance measures often have serious and fundamental flaws as tools of public management (Boyne & Law, 2005; Perrin, 1998; Smith, 1995; van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). This note is not about these challenges per se, but is suggesting that the tool box used for measuring public sector performance may be missing something.

#### A PROPOSITION

I would like to propose that, in addition to ongoing performance measures and periodic evaluations, an additional measurement tool that I will call a *performance study* should be used in many situations. And, further, that in a number of circumstances a performance study should *replace* one or more specific ongoing performance measures.

#### THE ARGUMENT

In building and maintaining ongoing performance measurement systems, the following situations occur:

- Data measuring some outcomes do not change much from period to period. This is often the case for “higher-level” outcomes where change may take years to become evident, but this can occur at any level of the results chain.
- Performance measurement data systems are weak, perhaps

due to being forced fit with already collected administrative data. The resulting performance information is weak.

- Performance monitoring sometimes occurs on an informal basis, perhaps in situations where the program component is relatively small, or occasional checking is seen as enough to keep things on track.
- Developing indicators for some aspects of performance is conceptually quite challenging and often results in proxies that stakeholders and other observers may feel are misleading or incomplete.
- Performance data may be just gathered and presented but not interpreted in a meaningful way for management.
- When a program or program component is relatively small and uses few resources, an ongoing measurement system may seem excessive, costly, and not practical.
- For whatever reason, the performance data gathered on an ongoing basis are not used.

In all these cases, and probably in others, it may not make sense to put in place an ongoing performance measurement process, especially if the data gathered are likely to be seen by many observers as not providing any new or useful information. Developing indicators, gathering data on a regular basis, and reviewing the data and indicators all require an investment of both resources and measurement expertise. More importantly, this type of requirement can be seen as taking resources and time of staff away from their prime job of delivering the program.

Rather, in these cases, what might be more appropriate and less costly would be to undertake a limited number of studies and analysis—*performance studies*—on those specific aspects of performance that don't lend themselves well to ongoing measurement, at least in the first instance. Such studies would be of quite limited duration, perhaps several weeks, and occur on an ad hoc basis. If useful, these studies could be undertaken on an infrequent but regular basis, such as annually, depending on how quickly performance levels change.

Typically these performance studies would focus on relevant “low level” results information—from an ongoing system if that existed—or gather such information often by taking a sample of some sort. I would see such studies as being single-issue focused, addressing a gap in the set of ongoing performance indicators, or examining a performance issue in more depth.

Rather than ongoing measures, performance studies might typically:

- analyze a sample of outputs, easily measurable outcomes, or transactions over a short time period,
- gather and assess qualitative data on a performance issue,
- analyze trends and progress toward targets,
- identify and discuss possible red flags,
- identify possible useful indicators for ongoing measures, and
- provide data for reporting, and/or suggest improvements in programming.

Performance studies should not be seen as simply “quick and dirty” evaluations nor seen as a replacement for evaluations. Evaluations are essential to a good performance measurement strategy and should be seen as significant one-off studies of some depth, dealing with a range of pertinent performance issues. Evaluations are undertaken infrequently, are costly, and take time, if they are to be done well. There are “short form” evaluations such as the rapid appraisal methods (Kumar, 1993), but these are still 3–4 months in length and aim to cover a range of evaluation issues. And I would not see performance studies as having the independence many evaluations call for. As with developing performance indicators, it would be program managers who would be responsible for and likely undertake—perhaps using a consultant—the performance studies to meet their information needs. Evaluators could of course help, as many now do in helping to design performance measures. The design of performance studies and the analysis of the resulting data should make good use of currently acceptable evaluation and social science practices.

Many organizations probably undertake at present what I am calling a performance study, such as conducting a one-off client satisfaction study or some other ad hoc assessment of some aspect of performance. I am suggesting that the performance study be recognized as an additional measurement tool and planned for as part of a complete strategy for measuring performance.

Table 1 compares and contrasts performance studies with evaluations and ongoing performance measures. The table illustrates what I would argue are the perceived differences; “performance studies” is an idea at this point in time.

**Table 1**  
**Performance Studies, Evaluations, and Performance Measures**

	<i>Performance studies</i>	<i>Evaluations</i>	<i>Performance measures</i>
Responsibility & funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>managers</li> <li>funded as part of a manager's performance measurement system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>evaluation unit (although can be done by managers)</li> <li>usually funded external to the program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>managers</li> <li>funded as part of a manager's performance measurement system</li> </ul>
Frequency & length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ad hoc, as needed</li> <li>time frame of weeks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>periodic, usually scheduled every 3–5 years</li> <li>time frame of 6–12 months or more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ongoing collection of data (typically daily, weekly or monthly)</li> </ul>
Burden on managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>light</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>always significant and often substantial</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>can be significant: need to do the data collection and entry on a regular basis</li> </ul>
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a single performance issue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a wide range of performance issues addressed in depth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a single performance measure</li> </ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>probably a single measurement or analysis approach used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wide variety of social science approaches used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>data collection</li> </ul>
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>could replace several individual performance measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>should not be replaced by performance measures or studies, but informed by them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>could replace a performance study if a good measure was identified in the study</li> </ul>

Performance studies might be used to:

- confirm — or not — current informal “monitoring” approaches to performance,
- provide analysis and interpretation of specific results of immediate interest to program staff and managers,
- be used instead of a single indicator where a more complex or nuanced interpretation of the performance issue is really needed,
- lead to some ongoing measurement if that seemed reasonable, and
- survey client groups as to performance.

Managing for results calls on managers to focus on outcomes, but managers still have to manage their resources and outputs on a daily basis. They need information to match their ongoing managing concerns. Performance studies could well serve these needs. They could specifically address these day-to-day management information needs in a timely manner. Further, by being an event with a one-off report

as the product, they could serve as a means to hold a “learning event” (Barrados & Mayne, 2003; Moynihan, 2005) to discuss the management problem in light of the evidence gathered. This might be a better triggering mechanism for such discussions than a routine performance report that appears every month and covers a range of performance indicators.

The benefits of ad hoc performance studies would seem to be clear:

- a less expensive approach than maintaining certain ongoing performance measures,
- more flexible as to what aspects of performance get what kind of attention,
- able to provide richer data and analysis than simple data on indicators, and
- less intrusive on staff time.

And if something interesting turns up that needs tracking, an ongoing measure can always be implemented.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

To date the measurement tool box for results-based management has been limited to either ongoing measures or periodic evaluations. Why has measurement of performance been limited in this way? There would appear to be no good reason for considering only these two measurement approaches, both of which are quite costly. Performance studies would be an in-between and low cost approach that could be used to supplement or, more likely, replace a number of indicators in the ongoing measurement system. Or, when designing a performance measurement system, performance studies would be seen as a legitimate measurement tool to use in building a cost-effective performance information system. The performance measurement system would then comprise a complementary set of performance indicators, performance studies, and evaluations.

Rist and Stame (2006) talk about the need to manage a continuum of evaluation information, of moving from studies to streams of evaluative information. Performance studies would fit well in reinforcing an organization’s stream of performance information.

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