Using Benchlearning for the Improvement
of the Institution's Overall Performance

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Abstract

In the present work, we are attempting to explain why Benchlearning is a particularly well adapted method of the contemporary scene and why is it useful in the public institutions' management, as well as to describe in concrete terms what happens during a benchlearning project.

Benchlearning is an instrument proposing a formal framework for the public institutions, to learn how to improve things from other similar institutions' good practices, allowing them to become a source of inspiration for their own activity and to learn how to maximize the obtained results and to avoid others' mistakes.

The goal of benchlearning is that institutions should learn from the strengths of other institutions and from their working manner, to be inspired and transpose, in their daily activity, elements from these experience exchanges, as well as to learn from others' mistakes and not repeat them.

The introduction of this instrument within the Prefect's Office of Timis County can constitute the corollary of all other modernization instruments applied at institution level, creating a framework to learn from other similar institutions' good practices, to learn how to do things better, to constitute an inspiration source for its own activity and to learn how to avoid the mistakes made by others.

Keywords: *Benchlearning, Public management, Institutional performance, Good practices, Public services*.

JEL classification: H110, H400, H700.

Introduction

There is a widely apprehended need for the institutional learning and for the institution's efficiency improvement. These include not only the private environment but also the public sector and the volunteering organizations.

In the past two years, the learning process appears as a new central paradigm for the companies' and other organizations' development. The dramatic increase of the human capital's or of intellectual capital's performance for enterprises' and public

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institutions' success had drawn even more attention, but the research programs have shown the same tendency (Karlöf, Lundgre, Edenfelt, 2001).

The purpose is to try to understand the manner in which learning may be influenced and what its applications are, concerning a public institution's success.

We are attempting to explain why Benchlearning is a particularly well adapted method of the contemporary scene, as well as to describe in concrete terms what will happen during a Benchlearning project.

Benchlearning is an instrument proposing a formal framework for the public institutions, to learn how to improve things from other similar institutions' good practices, allowing them to become a source of inspiration for their own activity and to learn how to maximize the obtained results and to avoid others' mistakes.

Benchlearning is an efficient instrument for organizational development, due to the fact that it uses generally accepted principles, like "Let's not reinvent the wheel" and "To learn from others' experience". It also is a manner in which the public institutions may spare significant resources in their development and efficiency process, by implementing mechanisms which have already been tested and used successfully by similar institutions[3].

1. Defining Benchlearning

A concise definition of Benchlearning could be: an organizational performances' improvement instrument, by learning from other institutions having experience in the fields of interest and showing considerable results.

A **general definition** could be: „*the continuous process of comparing and measuring to other similar national and international institutions, in order to obtain information about developed strategies, used practices and performed measurements which shall support the organizations in improvement actions to increase their performance” (*Malobabić, 2012*))*.

By developing of the Benchlearning process is pursued the encouraging of the dialogue, of the debates and last but not least, the development of ideas pursuing the integration of the learning process in the goal of an efficient organizational growth.

The Benchlearning's goal is that institutions should learn from the strengths of other institutions and from their working manner, to be inspired and transpose, in their daily activity, elements from these experience exchanges, as well as to learn from others' mistakes and not repeat them.

As a part of the learning process organization, the Benchlearning goals represent a concept situated at the base of the influencing of employees' attitudes, so that they would always wonder: "Who solves this problem better than us?" One may say that the Benchlearning instrument shows the organization its own need to learn and to bring changes up.

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[3] Centralo Unit for Public Administration Reform - CUPAR (2011), *Benchlearning instrument implementing methodology at public institutions' level*, multiple sources

Therefore, the **Benchlearning-ul** contributes to the organization's strategic planning and supports also the employees' implication, improvement and motivation, as well as organizational development.

The good practices are widely inherent to Benchlearning. The partners chosen for Benchlearning must be organizations whose good practice examples may lead to the increase of the performance of the institution applying it for the first time, subsequent to their adaptation and implementation.

By implementation of what it has learned as a result of the experience exchange, the institution creates its own good practices.

2. Benchlearning Functions

Benchlearning fulfills several functions. *First*, it obviously envisages to support organizational units to find an answer to the question: "How do you know your operation is efficient?" All responsible leaders, regardless their area of responsibility, shall be more and more constrained to answer this question.

Another essential function of Benchlearning is, of course, what can be learned from a good example. The "charge of inverted task" logic makes that the action for change becomes irresistibly attractive, especially if you can prove that somebody is better at the same thing.

Benchlearning's comparison ingredient has proven its efficiency in time, during many projects, where the interested persons were not satisfied only to compare the key indicators, but also started investigating the causes and the effects (Freytag, Hollensen, 2001).

Benchlearning's third important function is the behavioral and attitudes change, resulting from seeing one another as an image of our own entity. Our intent is to encourage the public institutions to free themselves from the classical attitude of autarchy and to adopt the principle that there is always someone there, who makes the same thing better or who has done it before you and therefore, from whom can be learned useful lessons.

3. Benchlearning Process Stages

Due to the fact that Benchlearning is an instrument to boost continuous improvement, it can be presented as a 6-stages cycle[4]:
- Planning the Benchlearning process: knowing the fields that need to be improved, starting from the diagnosis analysis SACFFPI (Self-Assessment Common Framework of the Functioning of Public Institutions), performed at institutional level.
- Collection, measurement and comparison of information: during this stage, the performance leader must be identifies, the organization boasting noteworthy results in the field of interest. By identifying the best practices, the

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[4] Centralo Unit for Public Administration Reform - CUPAR (2011), *Benchlearning instrument implementing methodology at public institutions' level*, multiple sources

organizations may identify the problem areas and provide possible solutions. The fundamental question is: "In what manner can an organization be successful?"

• Information analysis: learning from top organizations: "What did they achieved and how have they achieved it?"

• Unwinding of the Benchlearning session: in this stage, common work meetings take place, starting from the results' analysis, with the goal to clarify the aspects which may contribute to the implementation of good practices, rendering the activity more efficient.

• Adaptation and implementation: during this stage, those learned in their own organizational processes must be incorporated: the good practices must be customized according to the institution's specificity. An analysis must be performed, to see which of the learned subjects can be implemented in their own organization. During this stage, the following aspects are particularly important:

    o that the management should manifest availability for the change;
    o communication of all observations;
    o developing an implementation plan which would include good practices and ideas;
    o setting up goals to overcome gaps and weak points;
    o progress' monitoring and reporting.

• The assessment and repetition of the cycle: the learning project's results by accumulating experience shall be assessed, to set up the course of the future institutions' decisions.

Table 1. The stages and activities of the Benchlearning process

Stage		Activity
Planning of the Benchlearning process	1.1.	*Identification of the Benchlearning interest area/areas*
	1.2.	*Establishing of the Benchlearning team, on institution level*
	1.3.	*Identification of the potential partners*
	1.4.	*Establishing of the action plan*
Collecting, measuring and comparing of the data and information		
Analysis		
Benchlearning session	4.1.	*Information and documentation visit at partner institutions*
	4.2.	*Analysis of the results of the information visit to partner institutions*
	4.3.	*Central Benchlearning workshop*
Adaptation and implementation	5.1.	*Development and implementation of the improvement plans*
Assessment and process resuming		

Source: Adaptation after the Central Unit for Reform of the Public Administration - UCRAP (2011), Implementation methods of the Benchlearning instrument within the public institutions

The Benchlearning Process should be defined and described, in order to clarify what should be done, when it should be done and who will be considered responsible for each stage.

4. Applying of the Benchlearning instrument within the Prefect´s Office of Timis County

As leader of the institution of the Prefect's Office of the Timis County during 2009 – 2012, I considered that, in order to improve the whole institution's activity, we would need to introduce a new kind of management system for the organizational processes, a new management philosophy and new moods for the solving of issues, regarding the quality of the services offered to the citizens.

The possibility to correlate the implementing of the instruments developed up to this moment, as integrated management system, to act as researcher worker and as agent of the change and the wish to develop the whole organization activity more efficient were the main arguments in order to go on with the first steps in the modernization of the Prefect's Office of the Timis County and in supporting its involvement in the pioneering of the project „Modern mechanisms for an efficient administration", a major initiative of UCRAP, from within the Ministry of Administration and Internal Affairs (nowadays the Ministry of Regional Development and of the Public Administration), in the area of modernization of the public administration, financed by the Operational Program for Development of the Administrative Capability, project for which was made on national level a selection of the applications of the public institutions in November 2009.

We have decided to participate to this national selection in regard of the applying of some modern methods and instruments of public management and in order to obtain the following results: *diagnostic analysis, regarding the functioning mood of the institution*, which allows to the leadership to improve the existent management system of the institution; *multiannual modernization strategy*, which ensures the modernization of the institution based on its priorities and on the identified issues; *computer application Balanced Scorecard*, adapted to the specific character of the institution, which allows for the first time the use of a professional system of monitoring and of measuring of the performances, based on a series of indicators and targets to be reached; ***the methodology for the Benchlearning system***, which encourages the institution to share the experiences gained so far and to learn from these, as well as the *new opportunities*, the cooperation with similar institutions, from the country and from abroad, which allow a partnership accomplishing of project of mutual interest and the exchange of good practices and knowledge.

The Prefect's Office of Timis County has obtained a total score of 86,80 points, being therefore rated on the first place on country level, among 33 Prefect's Offices which applied, based on an assessment grid, regarding the existent practice on institution level in the elaboration and implementation of some strategic multi-annual documents, in attracting and implementation of the projects with non-reimbursable financing, and also regarding the existent administrative capability.

Thus, during March 28 – April 1, 2011, a number of 5 employees of the Prefect's Office of Timis County attended the training session on the Benchlearning instrument.

The introducing of this instrument may be considered a corollary of all the instruments, applied within the Prefect's Office of Timis County, creating a formal frame, in order to learn from the good practices of other institutions alike, to learn how to do things better and to become an inspiration source for its own activity, and in order to learn how to avoid mistakes of others.

A group of employees of the Prefect's Office Timis attended the Benchlearning workshop, which took place at the headquarters of the Prefect's Office of Giugiu County, during October 3-4, 2001, aimed for the simplifying elements of the working procedures in interest areas (the Prefect's Office of the Timis County wanted to achieve information regarding the *Control system for the legal character of administrative documents* from the Prefect's Office of the Giurgiu County), the diminishing of the analyze costs and at the development of the management systems for documents (*Management system of documents* of the Prefect's Office of the Giurgiu County), the identification and implementation of mutual advantageous partnerships, which should support the reaching of the strategic goals established by the two institutions involved in the exercise (*Development and implementation of key-partnerships within the Prefect's Office of the Timis County),* as well as the obtaining of information regarding the satisfaction degree of the citizens/customers (*Measuring of the satisfaction degree of the citizens/customers* - Prefect's Office of the Timis County).

Before the pioneering exercise took place, the employees of the Prefect's Office of Giurgiu County sent to the Benchlearning team from the Prefect's Office of Timis County a survey, regarding the Development and the implementation of key-partnerships at level of the Prefect's Office of Timis County, respectively the organization and development of opinion surveys, intended to measure the citizens/customers satisfaction.

In the Prefect's Office, we managed to implement a clear methodology for the **Benchlearning system**, meant to support and to encourage the institutions of the public administration and to share the gathered experiences and to learn from them, remaining thus anchored in reality and managing to face the changes intervening in the social-economical environment. In this matter, the Benchlearning instrument has been applied in the two the Prefect's Office institutions which attended this project, meaning the Prefect's Office of Timis County and the Prefect's Office of Giurgiu County.

We consider that, by the **applying of this modern management instrument within public institutions, besides PMM**, **CAF and BSC**, specific to the new public management and the new tendencies existent in the European and the international public management, the Prefect's Office of Timis County has taken essential steps towards becoming a flexible and modern institution, close to the citizen and to his needs.

We may say, more concretely, that *the applying of the modern instruments, and implicitly also of the Benchlearning induces positive changes upon the organizational climate from the Prefect's Office, upon the information level of the population from the meant county, afferent to the public institution*

of the Prefect's Office, regarding the competence areas of the Prefect's Office of Timis County, and also regarding the satisfaction level of the citizens, as result of their interactions with the Prefect's Office of Timis County, respectively with the deconcentrated public services from county level.

Conclusions

The quality management systems offer a global frame, in tight connection with the **Benchlearning**, as learning oriented process, which afflicts the whole organization.

CAF, as well as other organizational analysis instruments, can be used in order to support the purpose of the Benchlearning. A self-evaluation action with the use of CAF should lead to the elaboration of a plan, containing corrective measures for the areas/fields to be improved. The Benchlearning with other institutions is only another mood of accomplishing the improvement measures.

As also in case of the self-assessment, the Benchlearning includes the continuity and improvement idea of the performances of the institution, on long term. Considering the increase of the amount of institutions which apply the CAF pattern in Europe, it became easier to find Benchlearning partners through CAF.

By the implementation of the set of modernization instruments, based on the steady improvement cycle PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act), we obtained an integrated management system, which could serve as a good-practice model to the central and local public authorities, as well as for the deconcentrated and decentralized public services. The introducing of some reforms regarding the quality management, the developing of methods and instruments for the improvement of the systems and procedures of performance measuring and of reference, including the feedback mechanisms on the activity of the public administration are other results, which serve to the improvement of the organizational efficiency and contribute to the development of the administrative competence and of the quality of the public services offered in Romania.

A proper and integrated implementation of the modernization instruments will provide further en coherent organizational management, will make the functioning mood of the institution more efficient and will enhance the quality of the public services offered to its beneficiaries.

The PDCA cycle is an issue solving process in four stages, which has been developed for the monitoring and the improvement of the quality of processes within the organization.

The purpose is, that we should act based on the conclusions of the assessment. In this respect, the iterative feature of the cycle provides an extension of the knowledge, by creating of a constant feedback, necessary for the justification of the statements and the enrichment of knowledge, and the PDCA method offers a simple mood, by which people assume their actions, which lead to useful results in the pragmatic tradition of learning (Moen, Clifford, 2009).

The good-practice elements, which have been discovered my mutual learning have to be assessed regarding their transferability and only then applied in the own organization, by the PDCA cycle.

After identification of all gaps and flaws, by comparison of the own results with the results of other, the main target remains the establishing of some objectives and strategies, in order to reach to the good practices of the partners. Therefore, there have to be developed politics and plans, to reach these goals.

One of the advantages of this pattern is the one, that specific organization may adapt their criteria to their demands. The Benchlearning challenge is to develop in this regard a new common perspective for the attending organizations.

As a conclusion, we would like to emphasize regarding the Benchlearning process the fact, that the change is not always the correct answer. We have to identify the moment when the change is needed, as well as also the moment of time, when things should not be changed. In the past decades, the fact that the change is the normal state of things and that it is a good thing has already became an axiom, a self-understood truth in management. This has been repeated so often, that it seems now an undeniable truth, but a continuous change causes discontinuities, necessitates new learning processes and may cause harm by annulment of the previous obtained advantages.

Therefore, the learning has to consider also the situations, in which changes should not be made, and Benchlearning may help in this regard. Hence, steady improvement is not necessarily the same with steady change; it is just an improvement in the knowledge of what should be changed and of the moment, when the change has to be made, as well as of the things, which should not be changed.

The experience gained by the institution of the Prefect's Office of Timis County by the implementation of this instrument will be also shared with other public institutions, interested in the implementation of this instrument.

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