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# Use of Performance Information as an Organizational Routine in Management Control

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**Abstract:** Defining the use of performance information in performance measurement research in public organizations has been ignored. Based on a review of previous research and the realities of performance information utilization in public organizations, this article defines the use of performance information as an organizational routine in management control. The theoretical implications require scholars to focus on organizational routines in performance measurement research. To practitioners, it suggests that they should focus more of their attention to daily performance information use and view it as continuous organizational learning and as an organizational behavior modification process.

**Keywords:** use of performance information, performance measurement, organizational routines, management control.

## Introduction

The use of performance information becomes the biggest issue in performance management (Moynihan & Pandey, 2010, p. 849). As United States President Obama's Chief Performance Officer states: "the ultimate test of our performance management efforts is whether or not the information is used" (Zients, 2009, cited from Moynihan & Pandey, 2010, p.849). The use of performance information challenges our fundamental hypotheses in performance measurement and public administration. Performance measurement has been taken as an approach of the New Public Management School for *Reinventing Government* (e.g., Hood, 1991; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). If decision makers do not use performance information, how can we manage the performance of government employees effectively? This question will challenge the key propositions of New Public Management. Further analyses might bring us to the discussion of the politics-administration dichotomy. The definition of the use of performance information is a fundamental issue for further research.

This article attempts to define the use of performance information from a management perspective. It is structured as follows. First, the previous research on this issue is reviewed, especially the definition of performance information use and its reality in bureaucracy. Then, a new definition is put forward with information about and how it might work in public organizations. Following the description, the implication of the new definition for practitioners is discussed.

### **Current Problems in the Use of Performance Information**

Many scholars have noticed that the term “use” is a multi-dimensional concept instead of a catch-all word (de Lancer Julnes, 2008, p.59; Burke & Costello, 2005; de Bruijn, 2004; de Lancer Julnes & Holzer, 2001; Solberg, Mosser & McDonald, 1997; Weiss, 1998). Scholars often mixed the purpose of performance information use with the real use in their research. For example, in Behn’s (2003) article, he provides a list of eight purposes. But some purposes, such as budget and learning, are not only the purposes, but also the real uses.

The definitions of performance information use can be summarized into two categories. In one category, it refers to the specific utilization of performance information. For example, Van Dooren, Bouckaert & Halligan, (2010) provide a list of 44 uses of performance information. Most of them are specific uses. Some scholars discuss the uses in a specific field, such as resource distribution, educational policy, and so on (Poister & Streib, 1999; Johnsen, 2008). These studies focus on the specific uses related to performance information. In another category, some scholars attempt to study the use of performance information in light of its general meaning. They bypass the details of different specific uses and try to find out the general characteristics related with it. For example, De Lancer Julnes (2009, p. 47) divides the use of performance information into two stages: adoption and implementation, with adoption being the process of selection and implementation being a process concerned with more practical factors. In Moynihan et al’s (2010, 2011) articles, it is treated as a general meaning without specific prescription. For example, at the Third Minnowbrook Conference, the conference was held at the Minnowbrook Center, Syracuse University, New York, on September 3-7, 2008, one debated issue was the democratic value and performance measurement (see Moynihan et al, 2011). The scholars that reference the conference

focus on the value of transparency and information freedom. Here, it is obvious that performance information utilization only means one sector or aspect of the performance measurement procedure.

In these articles, a shared point is that either the definition of the use of performance information is missing or is taken for granted as a given rooted in common sense. A clear definition is often absent. An ambiguous definition causes problems in research. Authors regularly jump between the different definitions without clear notification, which leads to complexities in research. De Lancer Julnes (2008, p.59) ascribes the complexity in the use of performance measurement to two reasons: organizational environment and the narrow definition of use. In this context, a clear definition is necessary.

Meanwhile, we notice that different definitions result in different conclusions. When the use of performance information is taken as a specific use in a specific field, accurate conclusions or suggestions might be reached. However, when it is defined in a general way, the conclusions can be vague or be related with a set of factors, as listed in Table 1. From the theoretical perspective, such a situation reflects the complexity of performance information use. But the practitioners might be confused with different conclusions.

Table 1: Two examples of performance information use in academic articles

Categories of use	Author	Research questions	Use of performance information in the article	Suggestions or Conclusions
Specific uses	Johnsen, 2008.	Performance information and educational policy making	The performance information on grade was published for ranking of schools	“Politics and interests are important for understanding performance management in public policy” (Johnsen, 2008, p.172)
Use in general meaning	Moynihan and Pandey, 2010.	Why do managers use performance information?	The use of performance information is an organizational behavior	It is difficult to make clear which factor contributes more to the use of performance information by city managers (Moynihan & Pandey, 2010, pp.849-866)

In reality, citizens and city managers have different understandings of performance

measurement and its information utilization. Citizens are concerned about the result of government performance as a whole, and might pay little attention to procedures of performance measurement (Callahan, 2007). To city managers, performance information is an instrument for management control (Moynihan & Pandey, 2010). They use performance information to control the employees' behavior and improve the organizational performance. Therefore, we can see clearly that there are different understandings between citizens and city managers on this issue.

In academic fields, the citizen-oriented performance measurement might focus more on citizen participation and customer-oriented government, while the government-centered perspective tends to emphasize how to manage the civil servants' behavior and improve organizational performance. In practice, these two perspectives have some contradictions. For example, citizens and government might have different objectives in the targeting process of the performance measurement procedure (Van Dooren, Bouckaert & Halligan, 2010). Different stakeholders will have different aims which can also be shown in the use of performance information. These disputes will result in different measures, indicators, reports, and so on.

## **Use of Performance Information as an Organizational Routine**

With the rise of New Public Management (NPM), performance measurement has been the international trend in government management over the past three decades (Newton & Van Deth, 2010; Hood, 1991). More and more governments have joined the wave of performance measurement. From the theories and practices of government performance measurement, we can find that performance measurement has gradually been taken on as part of the routine tasks in government.

At the macro level, the use of performance information is utilized in the context of bureaucracy. The characteristics of bureaucracies are the background of analyzing this issue. Warwick, Meade & Reed, 1976, p.4) describe the characteristics of bureaucracy as following:

*A hierarchical structure involving the delegation of authority from top to the bottom of an organization;*

*Formal rules, regulations, and standards governing operations of the organization and the behavior of its members;*

*Technically qualified personnel employed on a career basis, with promotion based on qualification and performance.*

These characteristics set the context of performance information use in local government. First, there is a hierarchical structure which distributes the power in performance information use. Under the hierarchical situation, leaders and subordinates have different rights in dealing with the performance information. In many government organizations, it is the privilege of leaders or chief leaders. For example, in Moynihan & Pandey's (2010) article, the survey is only conducted at the city manager level. As Fesler & Kettl (1996, p. 137) claim, one dimension of accountability is faithful obedience to the law, to the higher officials' directions, and to standards of efficiency and economy. This is a type of bureaucratic accountability. The principal characteristics of bureaucratic accountability are internal mechanisms, supervisory relationships, rules and procedures, and a high degree of control (Callahan, 2007, p. 115). Accordingly, administrators and subordinates have different accountabilities within government. To the public administrators, use of performance information is a means to realize management control. To the subordinates, performance information reflects their achievements in their work.

Second, performance measurement in government has been prescribed at the legal level or institutionalized. For example, the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) represent the legalization of performance measurement in the United States of America. In China, there is no specific law to regulate the performance measurement in local government. But the Civil Servant Law of China has special articles about performance measurement in public organizations (see the Civil Servant Law of China, 2005, Chapter five, article 33-37). The institutionalization of performance measurement has profound meaning. It has prescribed the procedure of performance measurement and the use of performance information, such as the frequency of performance measurement and how to use the performance information. For example, chapter five of Civil Servant Law of China has specific requirements about performance measurement.

*Article 33*

*The assessment of a civil servant shall be managed according to the power limit of administration, and shall examine the morality, capability, diligence, achievement and uprightness thereof in an all-round manner and focus on the practical achievements of his work.*

*Article 34*

*The assessment of a civil servant includes assessment in usual days and periodical*

*assessment. The periodical assessment shall be based on the assessment in usual days.*

*Article 35*

*The periodical assessment of a non-leader civil servant shall be conducted in the form of annual examination. First, the individual concerned shall make a summary in light of the post and duties thereof and relevant requirements. Then the leader-in-charge shall, after soliciting the opinions of the masses, bring forward a suggestion of assessment grade, and the person-in-charge of the organ concerned or the authorized assessment committee shall decide the assessment grade.*

*As for those leading members of civil servants, the periodical assessment shall be conducted by the administrative organ thereof according to relevant provisions.*

*Article 36*

*The results of periodical assessment shall be divided into four grades: excellent, competent, basically competent and incompetent.*

*The civil servant concerned shall be notified of the periodical assessment result thereof in written form.*

*Article 37*

*The result of periodical assessment shall be considered as the basis for the adjustment of post, rank, wage, reward, training and dismissal of a civil servant. (Cited from the English version of Civil Servant Law of China)*

The Civil Servant Law of China has profound implications for performance measurement and performance information use in local government. First, performance measurement becomes a mandated program in the government's activities. This is the legal proof that performance measurement becomes government routine. Second, the Civil Servant Law prescribes the content of performance measurement, see Article 33; the frequency of performance measurement see Article 34; the procedure of performance measurement, see Article 35; the results of performance information, See Article 36; and the specific uses, see Article 37) respectively. These regulations deeply influence the use of performance information in local government.

It should be noted that the implementation of policy is not always very strict. Empowerment and policy flexibility are two measures used to deal with uncertainty. On the one hand, performance measurement is a top-down procedure in government organizations. The governmental agents must implement performance measurement within the Civil Servant Law. On the other hand, the empowerment has entitled local officials the freedoms to use the performance information inside of their organizations. They can modify the performance measurement regulations to a certain extent. The extents of empowerment, the decision makers' personality, motivation, educational level, and other factors increase the complexity of the results of performance information use.

Another characteristic of performance information utilization in bureaucracies is that performance measurement is organized by paralleled departments in local government. These departments have different performance measurement procedures and usages of performance information. For example, the personnel department works from a human resources management perspective. The organization department is responsible for cadre selection and supervision. The discipline department is responsible for supervising the government employees' behavior. They have different regulations about how to measure government employees' performance. It is difficult to make a judgment that these bureaucratic settings are improved or hindered by the effective use of performance information. But one point is clear, namely, that the use of performance information should be the result of coordination or cooperation between different departments in bureaucratic system.

### **UPI as Organizational Routine**

With reference to what organizational routine is, Becker's (2004) literature review summarizes that there are two definitions of routines: one is the recurrent interaction patterns and the other definition takes the routines as rules, standard operating procedures, and so on. Sometimes routine is used to denote an abstract pattern of relationships -often termed 'rules', and sometimes the so called behavior regularities and cognitive regularities (Becker, 2005). These are the basic characteristics of organizational routine. In this section, we will compare the similarity between performance information use and organizational routine.

Routines are ubiquitous in organizations. According to Weber's design, the nature of social and economic life in the West represents the heights of professionalism and routine activity (Orum, 1989, p. 57). Well-designed institutions, including those with performance measurement regulations, make government organizations run in an orderly fashion. Most of the government's daily work or recurrent jobs are done under the guidance of predesigned institutions. In this regard, government affairs can be divided into routine work and non-routine work. The routine works account for the majority of the workload. Therefore, for the study of bureaucratic behavior, such as use of performance information, it is theoretically and practically useful to focus on repetitive and routinized decision making (Inbar, 1979, p. 15).

As Inbar wrote:

*In its pure form the essential characteristic of a bureaucracy is that it is by definition a system where problem solving and decision-making have been routinized. Excluding the special case of crisis situations, a property of bureaucracies is, therefore, that the rules and procedures for the myriad of daily decisions are institutionalized. Moreover, through the operation of the principle of hierarchical accountability, these rules and procedures are constantly made explicit and often formalized. From these considerations, in particular the fact that decisions are routinized by the recurrent application of explicit rules and procedures follows a very important proposition. Its essence is that a bureaucracy operating under normal conditions may be conceived of as a social computer (Inbar, 1979, p. 13).*

When we place the use of performance information in the long term, we will find that it is a part of the “social computer”. As discussed earlier, there are prescribed rules offering clear definitions of performance measurement procedures and the performance information use in local government. These activities are set forth by law. The use of performance information is a recurrent program operated in a fixed time: yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly, or daily. All of these characteristics are fully in accordance with the definition of organizational routines (Becker, 2004; 2008). Therefore, we define the use of performance information as an organizational routine.<sup>1</sup>

## **How do Organizational Routines Work?**

Research on organizational routines will provide us some insights into this issue. Becker (2004) summarized eight characteristics of routines. Besides the two characteristics such as pattern and recurrence we discussed above, the other six characteristics are: the collective nature, mindlessness or effortful accomplishment, the processual nature, context-dependence, path dependence, and triggers. The collective nature of routines means that routines always involve multiple actors and their interactions; mindlessness and effortful accomplishment are two

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<sup>1</sup> On some occasions, the use of performance information might be non-routine decision-making behaviors. For example, the politician might use the performance information as an excuse to go against his competitors in seeking votes. The work union might use the performance information as an excuse for a strike. That is not the normal situation within government. In this article, we focus on the general phenomena of performance information use within the government.

controversial terms which show the variation of the routines. The processual nature of routines connect routine and organizational change, where routines are related with the speed of decay of routines, the speed of executing routines, reaction speed, time lag and delays, frequency of repetition, and point of time impact. Also, frequency and fashion of shifting from one routine or set of routines, duration of an activity, quality of information, and so on. Context dependence helps to explain variation of routines; path dependence explains the routines and stability from another dimension; trigger helps us to understand the situation and routine options (Becker, 2004, pp. 643-77).

At least two points can be generated from the literature review on organization routines. First, organization routines are not simply recurrent actions or patterns which will keep stability. Each organizational routine has two aspects: the ostensive aspect refers to expectations from the regulations; the performative aspect refers to the operating of organizational routines by specific people, at a specific time, in specific places. Meanwhile, the ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines will be enabled and constrained by various artifacts (Pentland & Feldman, 2008, pp. 286-87). This means that organizational settings and contingent factors will influence organizational routines. Therefore, we should not take it for granted that organizational routines will look like what we see on the surface. There are changes behind the pattern and recurrent behavior. Feldman (2000) has noticed that there is an internal dynamic to routines that can promote continuous changes. In her mind, changes occur as a result of participants' reflection on and reactions to various outcomes of previous interactions of the routines.

Further analysis of routines will connect the patterned behavior with institutions. What is the patterned process? Royer & Langley (2008) claim that patterned processes in the treatment of organizational issues are irrespective of whether these patterns derive from explicit policies and procedures or from implicit values and norms. Routines might be equaled to institutions, as the New Institutionalism has done (Hall & Taylor, 1996), where institutions include the formal and informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organizational structure. In this article, we adopt the historical institutionalism's definition. Organizational routines are similar to institution. Here, routines are not only the prescribed procedures, but also include conventions embedded in the organizational structure. That means that we need to pay attention to not only the performance measurement regulations, but also the conventions generated from the

recurrent performance measurement procedure, such as leadership style, organizational climate, and so on.

Once we define the use of performance information as an organizational routine, we could employ organizational theory to analyze the recurrent behavior. According to organizational theory, there are three levels for analyzing organizational behavior: individual; group; and organizational levels. The individual level analysis pays more attention to individual motivation, personality, education, and experiences and their influences on patterned behavior. The group level analysis focuses on formal and informal group influences. The organizational level analysis emphasizes the feedback and organizational learning process. The interaction between different levels increases the complexity of organizational behavior. Here, the connection between organizational routines and the use of performance information should be explained. Organizational routines depend on the connections, the stitching together of multiple participants and their actions to form a pattern (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). The final aim of performance information use is to improve organizational performance (Behn, 2003), which also addresses the problem of how to coordinate individual performance towards organizational objectives.

The above analyses have shown us the different directions of understanding performance information use as organizational routines. The ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines indicate the complexity. In order to uncover the law behind recurrent behavior, we need to delve into concrete organizations and analyze what is hidden behind the change and stability of the specific organizational routine, including the use of performance information.

## **Use of Performance Information and Management Control**

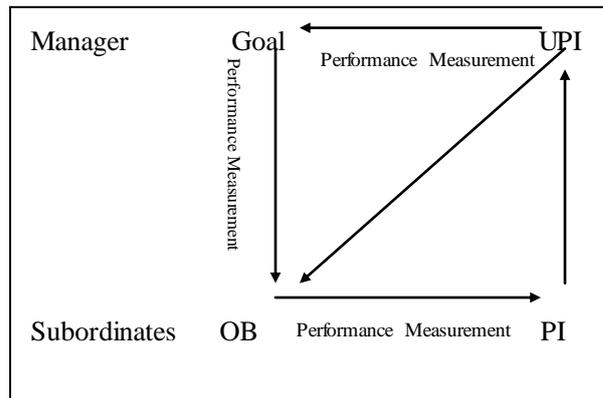
Organization implies control (Tannenbaum, 1962, p. 236). Performance measurement is an instrument in management control, which is an important mechanism used by management to align employee behaviors with the organization's objectives (Challagalla & Shervani, 1997, p. 159). In organizational theory, the purpose of control is to accomplish the organizational goal (Green & Welsh, 1988). That is the same as the final objective of performance measurement. Behn (2003, p. 590) has noticed that the characteristic of traditional performance measurement system

lies in behavior control. He claims that today managers do not believe the best way to influence the behavior of subordinates is to establish the one best way for them to do their prescribed task and then measure their performance (Behn, 2003, p. 589). He cites Kaplan and Norton's words that performance measurement as a management control only fits with the "engineering mentality of the Industrial Age" (Behn, 2003, p. 590). We argue that this might not be true.

The reality of government management still has a big gap with humanistic management in the knowledge age. The subordinates' capability and self-control do not reach the requirement of humanistic and self-management. This is the precondition of management control. Another aspect is related to the organizational context. In developing countries, most of the governments are still ruled by man, not by law. The elite group uses performance measurement as an instrument to control subordinates' behavior. Meanwhile, we find that the labor unions are immature in these countries. Government employees do not have enough power to fight against the control intention of their leaders.

Child (1984) puts forward a model of management control. In this model, the managers control the subordinates' behavior through goals and reinforcement. Monitoring and feedback are important means to influence the operating behavior. Performance measurement is the basic instrument for monitoring and feedback. The performance information is used by managers to control the operating behavior. In the long term, performance measurement is an instrument in organizational performance improvement. It is a continuous organizational learning process. Managers use the performance information for rewards and punishments. It is not a one-time procedure but an organizational routine. Managers control organizational behavior through performance measurement. The results of organizational behavior are shown in performance information. From the managers' perspective, the organizational goal is realized through the use of performance information. In the long run, organizational behavior is modified through the use of performance information as well. This is the basic model of management control by using performance information. These relationships are displayed in figure 1.

Figure 1: The process of management control through performance measurement and UPI



Note: this model is based on Child's (1984) model of management control. OB means organizational behavior, PI means performance information, UPI refers to the use of performance information.

## Implications for Theory and Practice

The definition of performance information use has a fundamental role in research and practice. To researchers, it shifts the research attention from the New Public Management perspective to organizational behavior. Jansen (2008, p. 169) claims that the focus of New Public Management on outputs and results implies a customer perspective on performance. Some scholars, like Callahan (2007), follow this trend and advocate citizen participation. However, citizen participation is still far from the reality no matter in the West or the East (Holzer & Kloby, 2005; Liu, 2012). The new definition takes the use of performance information as an internal organizational routine in public organizations. It will help us to turn the research focus to a more realistic perspective. The internal and external factors that influence routine behavior will be at the center of research. Performance measurement is not a onetime behavior in a public organization. Rather, it refers to an organizational routine. Researchers should delve into the operating routine to explore the reasons for stability and changes.

The implications for practitioners include several factors. First, organizational performance improvement could be achieved through behavior modification. The performance measurement process is not simply to measure organizational performance. It is also a learning process. The managers could use performance information as an instrument in management control and behavior modification. It is not simple results-oriented measurement in the organization. Performance measurement procedures and their uses will influence the organizational culture,

individual behavior, leadership, and so on. In turn, individuals and groups will learn from the performance measurement process and its uses. They would modify and adjust their behavior, which will influence the results of performance measurement. The organizational performance improvement process is also an organizational behavior modification process. The results could be measured in organizational citizenship behavior, which is an integrative indicator to evaluate the effectiveness of performance improvement.

Meanwhile, managers should pay attention to the designed behavior control and un-designed behavior control approaches. The designed behavior control measures are represented in performance regulations, rewards and punishments, special organizational structure design such as the performance measurement department, performance culture construction, organizational innovations, and empowerment. The comprehensive behavior requirements could be embedded into the performance measurement procedure. Some organizational innovations, such as standard work procedures or organizational structure reform, could improve the transparency and justice in management control. Performance measurement and performance information uses will influence the effectiveness of management control. They could increase the frequency of performance measurement to strengthen the results of behavior modification. The un-designed behavior control measures include transformational leadership, information transparency and justice, virtue models, and so on. These measures have effects on the individuals indirectly by influencing their perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. It requires that leaders pay attention to the role model and the decision-making process. They should grasp the art of management in operational procedures. For example, they could combine the strict behavior control and humanistic management together to build performance-orientated organizational cultures. The final goal is to construct the virtuous circle between performance measurement, behavior control, and organizational performance improvement.

Furthermore, this definition requires that managers pay more attention to each organizational factor in daily management. Performance measurement is a continuous organizational learning process. Without good management control, the advantages in organizational factors might be changed into disadvantages which consequently will hinder the performance improvement and effectiveness of performance measurement.

## Conclusion

Some scholars take the problems in performance measurement and the use of performance information as one failure of New Public Management (Hood, 1991; Van Dooren, Bouckaert & Halligan, 2010). In this article, we argue that people add too many ideas into the use of performance information. It is time for us to address the real situation in public organizations. With few citizens' participation and the restriction of bureaucratic mechanisms, the use of performance information is in essence an internal instrument in management control. In the long term, it is organizational routines which operate in public organizations regularly. Compared with the diversity of research on the use of performance information, this definition has offered a realistic and applicable approach for public managers. The use of performance information is not only one element in the performance measurement procedure, but also an organizational routine in management control. Practitioners should pay more attention to the daily performance information use, which plays a vital role in organizational performance improvement, organizational behavior modification, and organizational cultural construction.

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