

Conclusions

The above discussion was not meant to debunk performance measurement or to produce a sense of futility that the approach will contribute nothing of value to government. Rather, the purpose was to explain why performance measurement systems have delivered less than was hoped for. The explanation has been wide ranging, drawing attention to a number of factors but the main emphasis has been on the fact that performance measurement is a 'rational' management technique operating in a political context where other types of rationality often prevail. The most appropriate stance to adopt on performance measurement is realism about its potential and its problems. This will involve steering a reflective and practical, middle course between naïve faith in rational techniques and the cynical use of performance measurement for purely symbolic purposes. It is my impression that most public servants strive to find this difficult, middle ground between commitment and cynicism. They are not opposed to measuring performance; they are realistic about the possibilities of doing so and of using the findings to shape policy and management decisions.

Performance measurement is here to stay. Interested members of the public are becoming accustomed to the regular appearance of performance reports in many policy fields. There is a growing commitment by politicians at all levels of government to the idea of regular and meaningful reporting on performance. Not only have most public servants embraced the notion of performance management; they have developed their knowledge and skills of performance measurement. Despite periods of budgetary restraint, public managers have found ways to finance performance measurement systems. Real progress has been made in measuring dimensions thought to be un-measurable. Demonstrating the linkage between activities and outcomes remains a serious theoretical and analytical challenge, but even here governments have made headway with techniques like 'results chains', data envelopment analysis, adjusted performance measures and Service Effort and Accomplishment Reporting. In countries with longer experiences in performance measurement (such as Australia and the United Kingdom) there has been an evolution away from narrow bottom lines to multi-dimensional assessments, from reliance mainly on quantitative information toward the integration of qualitative information and from single perspectives to multiple perspectives on performance. Reports from governments offer many examples of where performance measurement has seemingly contributed to improved performance. In terms of external accountability, there is more information available to legislatures and the public. In summary, progress has been made. If there is still a sense of disappointment, it arises partly from the inflated claims made on behalf of performance measurement schemes when they were launched.

Developing a culture of performance within the public services of Anglo-American countries will require shared leadership and a more systematic approach to cultural change than has been followed to date. Launched in the midst of downsizing, there was always the suspicion that performance measurement was mainly a budgetary tool to chop down overgrown departments and programs. At a time when there is a lot of rhetoric about reducing red tape and procedural controls in order to let managers manage, many public servants are suspicious that 'the centre' does not really trust them and continues to practice control by means such as performance measurement and reporting. Recent scandals have led to the reimposition of many prior controls, so the overall level of internal regulation has actually increased.

For the future, a more focused approach to measurement and reporting should be used to reduce the burden on organisations and managers. The more selective approach should concentrate on information that is meaningful to managers and has the potential to support decision making and action. A more consultative and shared leadership approach should be developed as a basis for deciding what is measured, how and with what consequences. Finally, there is also the need to increase trust in reporting relationships and to create incentives for program managers to deliver comprehensive, balanced and credible news about performance. All of this will contribute to the emergence of a stronger performance culture, which ultimately is more important than the present blizzard of paper and e-files.