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Performance Measures: The Pursuit of Excellence and Accountability

Jerry A. Thrasher

Did the computer system maintain your expected response time during the performance test? Which airline has the best on-time arrival record? Which stock has the best earnings ratio? Performance measures are used universally to make decisions and evaluations. This is true in one's personal and business life. Why should it be any different in public institutions like libraries?

If you don't have goals or specific objectives, how do you know if you have accomplished the job or if you have even gone in the right direction? And if you don't have performance evaluations, how do you know you are doing a good job? Performance measures are an excellent tool to determine how you are doing.

It is also important to remember that we are all accountable to someone. We are hired to perform a particular job and to do that job satisfactorily or better. How do we know when we are performing well? When our co-workers notice, when our boss tells us, or when we can prove it? All are important, but the latter gives substance to the former and are helpful to both the supervisor and the employee.

Acceptable measures should be explored and tested within your library. Although they may not have been in writing, staff performance measures have always existed. How long should it take to shelve a full book truck in the adult nonfiction collection? How long does it take to catalog and process a book truck of new best sellers? Such measures go a long way in improving performance and letting staff know what is expected.

Benchmarks can be established based on experience and through a process of joint exploration. Having realistic performance measures is far better than relying on a supervisor's whim. If performance measures do not exist, both the

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employee and the supervisor should work together as a team to establish them. Supervisors should keep in mind that the excellent employee who has been doing this job for five years will have a different performance level than an employee who has just been hired. The level of performance will be less and may never reach the current level of expectation.

At another level, the process of developing performance measures can also help the supervisor justify requests for additional staff, equipment and other resources. A manager needs reliable information to justify budget requests to help staff serve their library constituency better. I believe that the more quantified that information is, the greater the likelihood of obtaining increased funding. If funding is not forthcoming, then the information is also available to reevaluate existing functions or services that need to be modified or dropped to live within your approved budget. If you can get increased performance from your staff and increased funding from your host organization without some form of performance or workload measure, more power to you. I would like to know what you are doing.

If you feel your employees can offer the library and their community more, or you are not getting the level of funding you think you should, performance and workload measures may be able to help. But they will only help if it is a cooperative effort between staff and management to reach the library's mission and/or goals.

In any case, pursuing the process will generate important data to demonstrate that you are doing a good job with the resources allocated to the library. The pursuit of meaningful performance measures is also the pursuit of excellence and accountability.

Performance Measures Can't Quantify Quality

Harry Tuchmayer

Do performance measures really work or are they just another obstacle dreamed up by administrators to make your life more difficult? After all, you were hired to do a good job in a professional manner, so why does your boss insist on holding you and your entire department up to some abstract standard barely obtainable? Sound familiar? It should, because it speaks to the underlying problems with performance measures — mistrust and misunderstanding.

Staff, whether professional or support, fear standards. Now don't get me wrong, that doesn't mean that they aren't interested in doing a good job. They are! They just know that the "real reason" we set standards is to document poor performance, not to reward good performance. So what exactly are administrators really after when they attempt to measure performance? Are they setting realistic objectives for each department for the coming year? Are they attempting to document performance of individual employees for the purpose of evaluation? Are they really just measuring the level of activity in the library in order to justify next year's budget request? Your answers to these questions have a lot to do with how receptive you are to performance measures. The fact of the matter is, staff mistrust standards because they don't understand how they will be used; they fear output measures because they don't understand why such statistics are collected.

Does this mean that performance measures are a waste of time? Perhaps not. Knowing how many carts can be shelved in an hour, how many books can be cataloged or processed in a month and how many bibliographies should be produced this year can help supervisors and employees set appropriate goals. However — and this is the difficult part — they need to be realistic and flexible benchmarks that encourage performance rather than create fear in the workplace. All too

often administrators establish measures in a vacuum, handing down goals and objectives as if they were dictated levels of achievement that each department is expected to meet. Instead of involving the individual employee in the process of measuring output for the purposes of establishing objectives, the instrument and its results are handed over to the immediate supervisor as a *fait accompli* ready to be adopted and acted upon. Performance measures must be developed and standards set by administrators, supervisors and staff if they are to have any value to the organization. Otherwise, you run the risk of creating an environment where individuals do what's expected of them, and no more. Thus, instead of setting standards for excellence you've created a cop-out for mediocrity.

All this is perhaps easier said than done. Structuring output measures that work takes time. They require a commitment on the part of everyone involved to honestly evaluate what can be done and how it can be achieved. It takes a willingness on the part of administrators to accept staff input and an acceptance on the part of staff that administrators really do have their best interests at heart. In the end, it takes a certain degree of trust that the objective is to improve service, not to penalize staff. Only in an environment of mutual trust and understanding can we even begin to address why we need performance measures.

So why do we need performance measures? Is it to determine which is the best library in the state or to encourage each of us to make our libraries even better than they already are? Is it to give administrators something to do in their office, or is it to help create a process of communication between administrators and their staff? Is it to prove something to the rest of the library world, or to prove something to ourselves?

We don't really need performance measures. Instead we should be working on ways to encour-

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