

Waiting at the Ophthalmologist: Benchmarking

Description

As the patient population fell, the physicians in a large, urban ophthalmologist practice became alarmed. Why were patients leaving? An eye examination should only take about 50 minutes, yet they were surprised to learn that their patients were waiting up to four hours for their eye exams! Small wonder, then, that patients would look elsewhere for their eye care.

To find out why it took so long for an eye exam, the physicians formed a quality improvement team to examine each medical and administrative procedure for inefficiencies and time wasters. The team finally made dramatic reductions in waiting time when they used benchmarking to learn how other organizations handled heavy customer flows. By studying banks, tollbooths, hotel registrations, and other medical practices, they were able to initiate several changes that reduced patient waiting time significantly.

A year later, the results were spectacular: the patient population rose to an all-time high, revenues doubled, and referrals rose 97 percent!

Learning Points

Benchmarking helps an organization learn from other organizations that may have already solved the same or a similar problem. Benchmarking requires that your mind be open to new ideas and that you study and learn from what others do best, whether they are inside or outside your own industry. To become world class, you must then adopt and adapt their best practices for your own organization's use.

Discussion Questions

Question: What do you see as the advantages of benchmarking?

Answer: An organization that benchmarks:

- identifies world-class organizations, products, and business practices to emulate
- determines the gap between its own operation and that of the best practice companies
- helps narrow that gap and even overtake the benchmark by adopting and adapting the best practices of all the best companies
- systematically and continuously integrates knowledge about best practices into the organization's products and services to stay world class

Question: What do you see as the pitfalls of benchmarking?

Answer: Benchmarking requires an openness to new ideas and a recognition that others may do "it" better.

- It can be difficult to admit that your own organization (or department) is not the best.
- If benchmarking results are used as a performance evaluation tool, the benchmarking team may begin benchmarking against poor performers, in an effort to look better.
- Some organizations may resist learning from other organizations, especially outside their own industry.
- Many organizations believe they are the world-class leaders and that there is nothing to learn from others.
- Benchmarking requires a significant time commitment: time to study your own internal processes and time to look outside the organization.

Question: How do you identify benchmarking partners?

Answer: When identifying potential benchmarking partners (those who are excellent in the area you are benchmarking), consider:

- high-performing divisions
- direct competitors with high profitability, market share, and growth
- companies outside your industry
- suppliers and customers
- potential competitors, i.e., upstarts

Question: Identify a potential problem in adopting practices used by other organizations.

Answer: Some may try to copy best practices from another organization exactly "as is"; the key is to adopt and adapt best practices that will fit your own organization's style and culture.

Question: What is upper management's role in benchmarking?

Answer: Upper management plays an active role in assuring that benchmarking occurs and that the organization learns and improves as a result. If upper management support is not evident, the benchmarking efforts can lack focus and may not result in anything more than industrial tourism by an enthusiastic benchmarking team.

To assure that does not happen, there are several things upper management should do.

- Set benchmarking priorities that address key business issues and problems, e.g., customer satisfaction, asset management, cycle time reduction.
- Assure that benchmarking results are integrated into the business plans. No major organizational project should occur without asking: Did you benchmark? What did you find out?
- Establish the environment needed for change by demonstrating a willingness to learn from best practice companies and refraining from "shooting the benchmarking messenger."
- Build the infrastructure to monitor benchmarking progress and results and to reward and recognize benchmarking achievements.

Question: What process(es) in your own organization would be good candidates for benchmarking?

Answer: Responses will vary. Probe: Ask why these processes would be good candidates. Ask how a benchmarking project would get started in your organization.