

## Benchmarking in Swiss Public Administration

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*Dr. Reto Steiner, University of Bern, Switzerland  
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### I. Starting Position and Context

The federal organization of Switzerland is also evident in the execution of benchmarking. The 7 departments, 26 cantons, and 2715 municipalities of the federal administration use the tool of benchmarking very differently. A uniform pattern is not recognizable. In addition to individual initiatives of selected organizational units, however, recently the desire to also implement nation-wide and systematic projects was increasingly observable. A basic trigger for this has been the New Public Management discussion in Switzerland. The special benefit of benchmarking in Switzerland is seen in the creation of a quasi-competition. This is supposed to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of governmental actions. Furthermore, there is an attempt to increase performance and reduce the cost to national minimum standards.

### II. Proliferation Within the Individual Federal Levels

- *Federal Level:*  
Switzerland is increasingly participating in benchmarking projects of international institutions. These include, for example, the OECD PISA studies. These comparisons should produce an assessment of the effectiveness in individual policy areas. Furthermore, the Federal Government is sponsoring benchmarking projects among the cantons. Examples of these can be found, for example, in the areas of education and healthcare. The law requires this implicitly by stipulating an economical and effective performance of services as a basic principle (e.g., Art. 43a of the Federal Constitution), which must be regularly evaluated (e.g., Art. 170 of the Federal Constitution and Art. 36 of the Law Governing Governmental and Administrative Organization). The Federal Government frequently assumes the role of a facilitator, for example, by supporting the development of indicators and processing the basic data in the Federal Bureau of Statistics or by helping to interpret the data. A comparison of federal offices to one another is relatively rare.
- *Cantonal Level:*  
At the cantonal level, benchmarking projects are generally initiated by the Federal Government or also by the conferences of the cantonal ministers. The focus is primarily on output and outcome comparisons *among* the cantons; up to now, a comparison of entire organizational units *within* the cantons has been less frequent. Furthermore, the cantons promote benchmarking at the municipal level, since the cantons want the tasks assigned to the municipalities to be performed according to cantonal requirements, that is, by utilizing the transferred money economically.
- *Municipal Level:*

Numerous benchmarking projects are in progress on the municipal level. These projects are initiated by the municipalities themselves, by the canton, or even by other organizations, such as, associations or consulting firms. Since the municipalities are generally small organizational units, there is a greater willingness to perform a comprehensive organizational comparison at this level. In addition to projects that are carried out systematically, municipalities also perform continuous, informal comparisons, as a national survey of municipalities has shown. The effects of this informal benchmarking should not be underestimated.

### **III. Success Factors**

The factors that influence the success of benchmarking projects are named below:

#### **Success Factor 1: Commitment by the Political Leadership**

- A clear commitment to benchmarking is necessary, i.e., support for political leadership and administrative management.
- The employees must be included in the process (“Transform Those Who Are Affected Into Participants”). Public information and training sessions are opportunities for removing existing barriers (barriers of will, ability, desire, and norms). The fears of employees regarding whether personnel will be reduced following a benchmarking process or whether there will be individual sanctions should be taken seriously.

#### **Success Factor 2: Integration and Organization of Controlling**

- Benchmarking is a component of a comprehensive controlling and quality concept. This tool makes sense primarily when it is integrated into a new leadership and steering model of the institution. Quality management (e.g., Common Assessment Framework) should be a part of the administrative culture.
- For systematic benchmarking, the administration should know its products and organize its accounting system in such a way that the full costs can be calculated.

#### **Success Factor 3: Comparable Partners and Objects**

- During the initial implementation, partners with similar or not significantly different areas of activity should be sought as comparable institutions, thus increasing acceptance and simplifying tasks during the initial phase.
- Benchmarking partners from the private sector are a plus.
- The institutions themselves, the superordinate governmental levels, and independent institutions should be considered as possible benchmarking initiators. The three possibilities have their specific advantages and disadvantages. Collaboration with professional experts in methodology related to the establishment of competency centers makes sense, in order to be able to take advantage of know-how synergies.

#### **Success Factor 4: Applied Approaches and Tools**

- The cost-benefit ratio should be advantageous. Bureaucratic and oversized benchmarking procedures should be avoided.
- The focus of governmental benchmarking should get away from pure cost orientation (input orientation), and the processes, as well as the output/outcome, should take center stage.

#### **Success Factor 5: Assessment, Communication, and Improvement Management**

- Internal discussions regarding the results are essential.

- The results should be made public and used as the basis for concrete improvements. Communicating already at the beginning of the project and following the assessment phase generates a certain pressure to act. Here, one again sees the necessity of having the top managerial levels and the political authorities behind the project. This engenders a greater probability for change. The uninterrupted continuation of benchmarking is important.