

# INDUSTRY BEST-PRACTICE BENCHMARKING IN THE EVALUATION CONTEXT

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## Introduction

Suppose you are a member of a newly elected government – if you were a new Minister of a human services portfolio, like health education or community services, who would you want among your departmental advisers, or who would you pick as the secretary to head the new departments you create? Would you choose SES (Senior Executive Service) officers with recent experience of the same field, commercial industry leaders or professors of health, education or welfare studies? If you had not been the ‘Shadow Minister’ in that field (and if there was no clear political agenda) you would probably be guessing and try to find some basic rules of the game in that field which would give you some guidance as to the types of skills needed to foster ‘best practice’ within the policy limits of your party’s platform. Even if you read all the evaluation and review reports your staff could obtain, how would you know that these are fair and reasonable guides as to the key problems and performances of these organisations you are about to inherit?

The problem is that there is *no* clear guide as to best practice in the welfare, community services and health arenas, *nor* is there a clear set of standards on how to judge the merit of the evaluation of those fields. The latter concern is to be addressed in an article in the section ‘Focus on an Evaluation Issue’ of the next

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This paper has benefited from the comments of Chris Talbot, and the cooperation of Jane Tredwell, Dr Reaburn Reynolds, Dr Ian Radbone and Dr John Dunn in making the South Australian Public Forum on benchmarking (sponsored by CERT) a success.

*This paper is an extension of the address Dr Sharp gave at the 1993 International Conference of the Australasian Evaluation Society, in Brisbane, as the ET&S Award winner for 1992. Dr Sharp has responded to Professor Joseph Wholey’s ‘dream’ of best practice in evaluation, by this review and another article on the ethics and standards in evaluation (see next issue).*

issue of *Evaluation News & Comment*. The article will focus on ethics and standards in evaluation.

The present article addresses the former problem of best practice in the public sector, not by proposing what *is best*, but by complementing the comprehensive papers on total quality management and quality assurance in the July 1993 issue of *Evaluation News & Comment*, and the review of performance indicators (*Evaluation News & Comment*, December 1993). The process of benchmarking takes us one step further along the quality management and evaluation path.

Recent interest in government and private sector management in fostering the same ‘industry best practice’ benchmarking approach in the public sector and perhaps *non-profit* organisations concerned me, as no-one (including this author) seems clear about what is ‘best practice’ in many of the public sector domains. This came to a head in South Australia recently with the commissioning of two major consultancies to conduct benchmarking studies by the then *Office of Public Sector Reform* (under the Arnold Labor Government, and possibly to continue under the Brown Liberal Government). So some colleagues and I decided to hold a public forum on benchmarking (see Figure 1).

Here I take a critical look at some aspects on the issue as it is being applied in public sector management. In doing so I have concentrated on the developments in South Australia, reviewed some useful papers to introduce key concepts, selected some commentators to broaden out the review, and provided a bibliography which will assist those interested in following up on these issues.

I am not convinced that industry best-practice benchmarking is the solution to all problems of performance management in the public sector, but it is a serious force which could be complementary to evaluation practice. For instance, it could assist those managers in danger of becoming preoccupied with internal performance management and assessment, by providing regular, externally oriented information on important matters like customer service or product quality. However, if comparison with a related quality framework (TQM) is any guide to the future of benchmarking in Australia, then the public sector ought to continually review its usefulness and viability, judging by two recent business articles: ‘Faced with hard times, business sours on “total quality management”’ (Mathews & Katelin 1992; reproduced in *Evaluation News & Comment*, July 1993) and ‘Business lacks commitment to total quality management’ (James 1991).

A useful survey of benchmarking in the Western Australian public sector (Frost & Pringle 1993) showed that there were sensitivities towards the notion of using ‘competitors’ and the connotations of competitiveness seemed to go against the public sector ‘culture’. So they followed Camp’s (1989) categories (internal, competitive, functional and generic benchmarking – see Table 1), and identified some alternative approaches to benchmarking for the public sector. Frost and Pringle (1993) have provided a valuable review, and a step towards needed research, but there are still many public sector managers who probably are not clear on what benchmarking is, and how it relates to evaluation.

**FIGURE 1: SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC FORUM ON  
'BENCHMARKING IN PUBLIC SECTOR AND NOT-FOR-PROFIT AGENCIES'**

**15 November 1993**

In South Australia concerns arose about the pressure applied by the Office of Public Sector Reform, of the former Arnold Government, to impose benchmarking in the public sector. Also there were similar concerns about the implications of the *Solo to Symphony* report which suggested (among other reforms) that benchmarking be considered in the non-government, not-for-profit agencies. These circumstances prompted the need for an independent public forum on the current developments in benchmarking. CERT (the Consortium for Evaluation Research and Training, a joint venture between Flinders University and the University of South Australia) hosted a free and open meeting for discussion on how to foster dialogue and research on meaningful and useful performance indicators and benchmarking in the public sector and non-profit sector. The speakers and their topics were:

**Current Developments in Benchmarking of Corporate Services in the South Australian Government**

*Jane Tredwell, Office of Public Sector Reform*

**Notes:** The State Government wanted to shift the focus from processes to customers' needs, and to begin work on better management of the corporate overheads of government services. To do this it set up comparisons with the corporate

services of many commercial organisations, with the aim of identifying what needs to be done to improve government operations.

**Research on Performance Indicators and Benchmarking in the Public Sector**

*Dr Ian Radbone, International Graduate School of Management, University of South Australia*

**Notes:** Performance indicators used across government business enterprises can give a basis for comparisons of efficiency, but despite the good deal of talk about it, little has been done about benchmarking for effectiveness comparisons.

**Evaluating Alternative Vocational Education Procedures**

*Dr Reaburn Reynolds, Education, Flinders University*

**Notes:** Critical of the benchmarking of basic vocational competencies, especially for the proposed Australian Vocational Certificate for secondary school and TAFE preparatory-level education; concerned that the three assumptions of this approach (that is, it is possible and desirable to standardise how a piece of work should be done; standards can be established by examining existing work; and tripartite industrial committees should decide on which standards apply) have not been debated.

**ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AUSTRALIA (SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION)  
AND DELOITTE TOUCHE TOHMATSU'S SEMINAR ON 'BENCHMARKING OF CORPORATE SERVICES:  
THE OUTCOMES AND THE NEXT STEPS FOR THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SECTOR'**

**23 February 1994**

According to RIPAA's announcement, 'the South Australian public sector was the first in Australia to participate in a benchmarking project of corporate services – human resources, financial management and information technology'. The speakers and their topics were:

**Why Benchmarking? An Overview and Background**

*Anne Howe, Former Director, Office of Public Sector Reform*

**Notes:** In the shadow of the huge State debt, the Office of Public Sector Reform wanted to conduct benchmarking studies on customer satisfaction and corporate services in order to get baseline data on important aspects of government operation, and to promote cultural change in the public service; they hired the consultants Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (for the corporate services benchmarking) and Price Waterhouse Urwick (for the customer service benchmarking) to conduct a *diagnostic approach* (that is, not only to look for performance gaps in terms of dollars but also to determine how and why these gaps exist). A staff survey suggested that the public sector can change (especially with a 'burning platform behind you'). Apparently the new Premier wants the public sector to get on with it and implement the benchmarking recommendations for corporate services.

**The Benchmarking Project – The What and How**

*Simon Drilling, Partner, Management Consulting, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu*

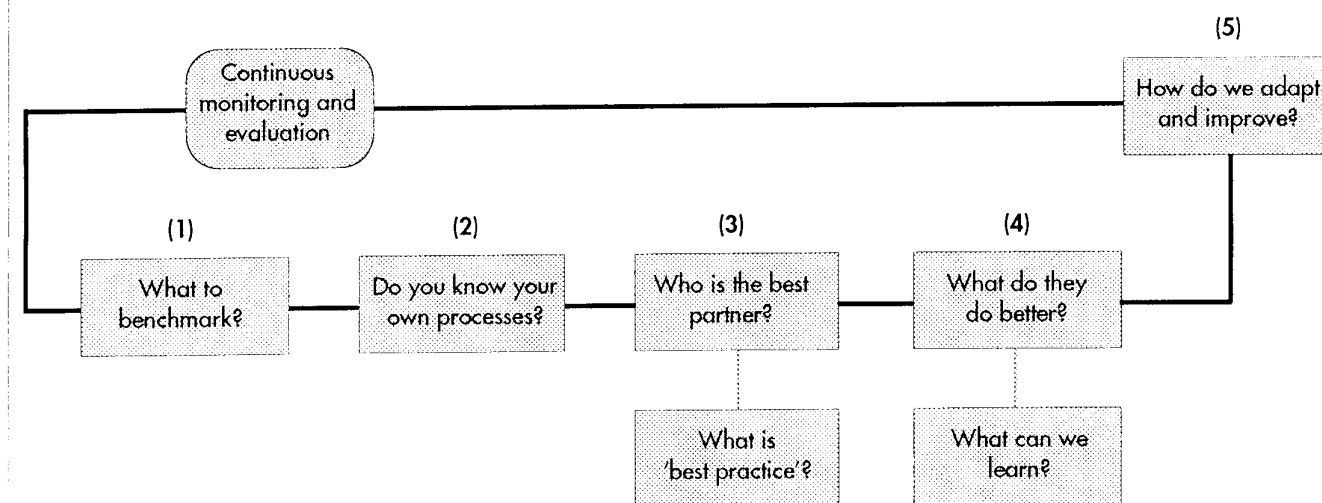
**Notes:** The consultants were wary of the very tight timetable set by the previous government (11 weeks); they spent about 40 per cent of the time establishing benchmarks and 60 per cent on benchmarking; although there were doubts from some that the data was at best 80 per cent accurate, they found lots of effort put into training on performance management but no rewards and sanctions to ensure it works; the public sector needs to use its size to make the most of economies of scale and standardisation; the central agencies were good at setting priorities and rules but not good at giving the operational CEOs the authority to do what they need to.

**The Outcomes of the Project and the Next Steps**

*Panel discussion (including those above) and Jane Tredwell and Jerome Maguire*

**Notes:** A follow-up questionnaire will go out to the 98 participants of the original benchmarking questionnaire to review the process and prepare for what are the next key steps; this qualitative information was the most useful, because the 'metric' or benchmark information does not tell why the gaps are there; they were concerned not to promote the benchmarking partners as the 'champions' that must be emulated, but to learn from the gaps in public sector operation.

FIGURE 2: THE MAGICAL STEPS (PLUS OR MINUS 2)



### Steps in Benchmarking

Most introductions to benchmarking identify five steps, such as in the Arthur Andersen Benchmarking Framework (1993) as shown in Figure 2. However, it is important not to miss the unstated steps which are equally essential, that is:

**Front-end decisions:** For example, review your organisation's change strategy, to assess the relevance of total quality management and benchmarking to the overall

plans, and review the benchmarking consultants and options available.

**Motivational processes:** For example, what is the available incentive for the partners? What does your organisation have to offer? What commitment can you make?

### Definitions: Benchmarks and Benchmarking

One of the interesting aspects of benchmarking, from the point of view

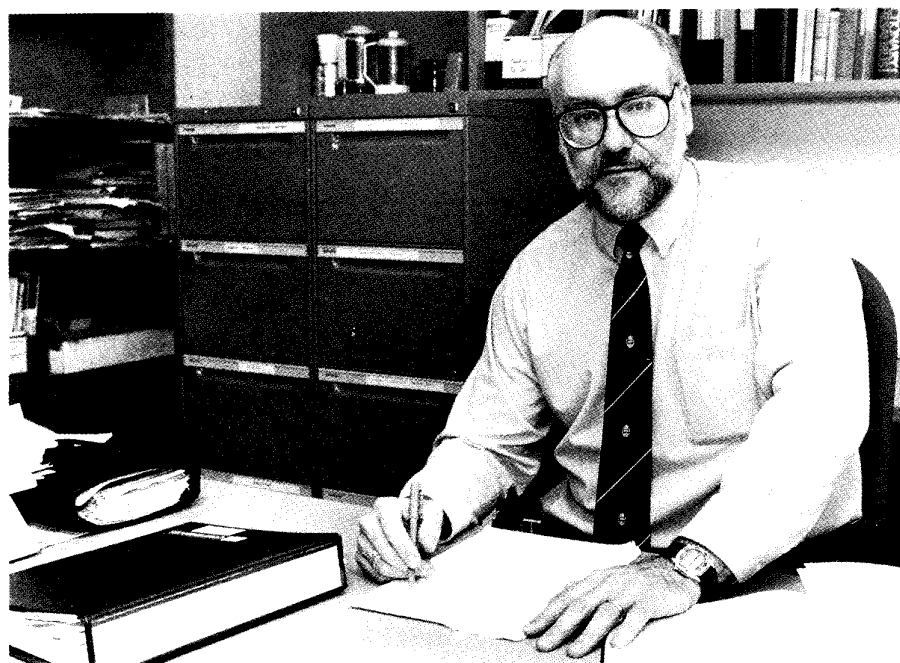
of those concerned with evaluation, is the distinction between the establishment of *benchmarks*, that is, the *quantitative* (data-gathering and comparison) processes and the *qualitative* aspects of *benchmarking*, including the associated processes of strategic change management.

In compiling definitions for the reader in the public sector, some of the relevant literature referred to includes corporate consultancy reports delivered to government by major international accounting firms, some academics and Australian practitioners. For example, White wrote an interesting series of articles (published in *Australian Communications*, 1992-1993) on the subject and his definition of benchmarking is included in the table of key terms (Table 1).

It is often emphasised that the process of benchmarking uses *benchmarks* as tools to identify where there are gaps in performance and, by comparison with exemplary performance, to learn how to improve performance.

### In Performance Management a Benchmark Can be:

- a 'qualitative prescriptive standard'
- a 'minimum quality standard', that is, a measure of quality
- a normative (population-wide) measure of quality
- an indicator of viability
- a baseline measure for monitoring a performance indicator



Associate Professor Colin Sharp

TABLE 1: DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Key Term	Source (See References, p 33)	Definition
Benchmarking	White 1992, p 103	'External focus on internal activities, functions or operations in order to achieve continuous improvement in service effectiveness and efficiency'
Benchmarking	Camp 1989, p 10. He distinguishes a further four types (pp 61-65):	'The search for industry best practices that will lead to superior performance'
	<i>Internal</i>	Comparing operations among functional parts within the same organisation (especially relevant with multidivisional organisations such as in the public sector, and multinational companies)
	<i>Competitive</i>	Comparing with a direct competitor in commercial organisations
	<i>Functional</i>	Obtain information about industry leaders in certain functional aspects of management or service, etc, regardless of what industry they are in
	<i>Generic</i>	Looking for the 'best of the best', by extending 'functional' benchmarking to any function, regardless of whether your organisation has it, or not
Benchmarking	Arthur Andersen 1993	'... a systematic and continuous process of measuring and comparing your organisation's business processes against leaders, anywhere in the world, to gain information which will help drive continuous improvement'
Benchmarking	Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu 1993	'... a process for improving any aspect of a business ... by determining how other companies, not only competitors, perform specific tasks/functions and then creatively adapting/integrating "good ideas"'
Benchmarking	Price Waterhouse Urwick 1993	'Reviewing specific processes and matching them with the same process in similar organisations which complete those processes more effectively. The best ideas are captured, modified (if required), applied and step changes in efficiency are created'
<i>Strategic Benchmarking</i>	Watson 1993	Engaging with benchmarking partner(s) to go beyond 'operational' benchmarking (that is, reviewing specific business functions) to explore comparisons of company-wide strategic issues
Competitor Analysis	Porter 1980	Diagnosis of environmental opportunities and threats, the competitors' strengths and weaknesses, portfolio analysis and competitive posture analysis, and the strengths and weaknesses of one's own organisation

- a tool to identify and understand how best practice can be achieved
- a technique for focusing, throughout an organisation, on external, customer orientation or competitive factors
- a set of checklists of essential ingredients of good service operation.

To refer to Scriven's (1991) *Evaluation Thesaurus* in the above table would not immediately assist the reader in the quest for understanding benchmarking in terms of evaluation, as he focuses only on his pet field of computer usability evaluation. But delving into the back issues of one of the top personal computing magazines, *BYTE* (February 1984), does

lead to relevant insights. As in the reviews of total quality management it emerges that 'performance is not quality' (Carroll & Rosson 1984, p 168); 'benchmarks are a popular way to compare both hardware and software [across different computers] but how meaningful are they?' (Houston 1984, p 160).

## Government Business Enterprises

The debate about the role of government in commercial activity has been continuing for some time (for example, see the special issue of the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* edited by Martin Painter, 1986). Nevertheless, the Special Premiers' Conference of July 1991 established the Steering Committee on National Performance Monitoring of government business enterprises (GBEs). Their use of financial performance indicators (for example, see EPAC Paper 25 by Clare and Johnston 1993), has led to a cross-the-board comparisons and benchmarking of performance in GBEs. But what is done with this massive pile of data? In South Australia, there has been an attempt to focus on constructive ways to use this sort of information in the public sector.

### Competitor Analysis as a Form of Benchmarking: SA State Services

As in commercial organisations various GBEs have to deal with market forces, which leads their competitive strategy to one of the commonly used types of commercial analysis, that is, 'competitor analysis'. An example of competitor analysis as a kind of benchmarking for the public sector commercialising organisations was presented at the 1990 AES International Evaluation Conference in Sydney. Ray Dundon (1990), then the CEO of State Services South Australia (including the State public sector printing, computing and vehicle fleet services) advocated 'using your competitors to stimulate cultural change' in commercialising those services. This organisation development approach included using competitors' financial performance indicators, and prices as benchmarks for evaluation and as information for internal staff education. Today State services continue to use this approach to review their position in the market.

Generally, competitor analysis relies mainly on gathering externally available public information, financial data, quasi-historical event interpretation and subjective impressions or rumours. The current trend in benchmarking is to set up cooperative arrangements across relevant organisations, which may or may not include competitors. Camp (1989) would call this *competitive benchmarking*, but comparing one's organisation with a direct

competitor in commercial organisations may be difficult for commercial strategic reasons; however, in the public sector, it can be a beneficial awareness raiser, although politically complicated, as the commercial interests often regard this as unfair because government agencies have tax exemption and other privileges.

A success story close to home is the Australian National's Ghan train. They used benchmarking processes first to realise in a strategic sense that the Ghan was not in the travel business and could not compete with aviation and automobile modes. 'The benchmarking they did was not against other railroads, it was against five-star hotels. They actually made a deal with a five-star hotel chain and trained their employees jointly with the hotel employees because they are providing a service unheard of in American railroads' (Godfrey 1994, p 45).

### Ethics of Competitor Analysis

An example of how not to conduct competitor analysis was seen last year in the case alleging that British Airways used the computerised booking network (BABS) to access customer information of Virgin Airlines.

Indeed, there are strong guidelines on the ethics of benchmarking as established by the International Benchmarking Clearinghouse (see Figure 3).

### Limitations of Benchmarking

Also in South Australia there has been the Alexander review (1991) of non-profit

'community services sector' and 'industry' analysis of the non-government welfare services which led to the implementation committee's report titled *Solo to Symphony*. One of its recommendations was that there be a benchmarking study done for the community-based welfare organisations. But more often these days the notion of competition among them threatens their collaboration. This is one of the reasons which promoted Chris Talbot (Senior Consultant, South Australian Council of Social Services) to contribute his section of this review (see Figure 4).

Benchmarking as a metaphor is apparently attractive because it carries with it an air of certainty and measurability, a situation which seems to be craved by some involved in the complexities of service delivery in government and non-government agencies. However, as with its cousin, the performance indicators approach to evaluation, benchmarking loses its aura of certainty once it comes under scrutiny.

The cursory review of the literature revealed at least a dozen definitions of benchmarking or benchmarks in performance management (see Table 1). These differing definitions indicate that, far from overcoming uncertainty, there are a range of issues that need to be debated if benchmarking is to be adopted as an evaluation tool in the public sector and non-profit organisation, including:

**Conceptual clarity:** Recent surveys have demonstrated widespread misunderstanding and variable interpretation of what constitutes benchmarking and

#### FIGURE 3: BENCHMARKING CODE OF CONDUCT

From the International Benchmarking Clearinghouse  
of the American Productivity & Quality Centre

##### Four Relevant Ethical Principles for Public Sector Organisations

**Confidentiality:** The information gained from benchmarking is proprietary and confidential, and so should not be revealed to another party without the provider's consent.

**Fair exchange:** Benchmarking usually involves a partnership based on sharing like information.

**'First-party contact':** First contact with a potential benchmarking partner should be made through the top management rather than the specific functional unit generating relevant information for benchmarking.

**'Third-party contact':** Third parties should not be allowed to piggyback on the benchmarking arrangement between two organisations unless both agree.

#### FIGURE 4: FIVE CRITICAL CONCERNS REGARDING BENCHMARKING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS

By Chris Talbot, South Australian Council of Social Services, Adelaide, SA

**Conceptual clarity:** Are there more than a dozen definitions?

**Centrality of values:** Whose values drive the standards?

**Reaching agreement:** Outputs might be objective, but who can agree on processes and outcomes?

**Problems of measurement:** How can quality of service, etc be measured? And who really uses all that data?

**Politics of resource allocation:** Who gets to set the standards and apply the evaluation criteria?

the implications for organisations of its use. There is a clear danger that if this problem is not addressed it will actually undermine the efforts of organisations to become more efficient and effective.

**Centrality of values:** Part of gaining clarity involves a recognition of the fact that benchmarking cannot overcome the problem of divergent values. Debates about what constitutes a quality service for example, are substantially based upon people's value positions. The use of benchmarks as service standards may temporarily dampen debate about standards, but debates will eventually resurface.

**Reaching agreement:** Reaching agreement about appropriate benchmarks is inherently difficult indeed; the likelihood is that they will be imposed by those controlling resource allocation. My prediction would be that this would take place in the first instance through output benchmarking and then move into the even more difficult and contentious area of outcome benchmarking if the earlier attempts at benchmarking outputs were successful and remained politically feasible.

**Problems of measurement:** Output benchmarking is probably as far as the managerialist-elastic will stretch. Attempts at outcome benchmarking will bring into focus disputes over the relevance, meaning, and reliability of data and data systems in the human services field.

**Politics of resource allocation:** A fundamental problem with existing

benchmarking discussions in the public and non-profit sectors is the level of abstraction of the debates. Terms like 'benchmarking', 'best practice' and 'quality' are strung together as if everyone was clear as to what they meant, or as if there was agreement over them. At present it is certain that no agreement exists, and some organisations are concerned that externally imposed benchmarks will have negative effects on the quality of their service and standards of practice. Furthermore, non-profit organisations are fearful that benchmarks will be used by funding bodies to enforce particular forms of organisational structuring.

Existing and future attempts by public and non-profit sector organisations to follow benchmarking into the commercial minefield would do well to heed the warnings of the National Industry Extension Scheme (NIES) Benchmarking Project Guidelines (see *NIES Benchmarking Self Help Manual*, 1993, pp 13–19). These include the following:

- organisations that attempt to benchmark without proper preparation and tools of change are likely to experience counter-productive results
- if benchmarking is done badly, it is likely to be disempowering to the staff, resulting in less effective services
- ownership of the findings of benchmarking (especially performance gaps) appears critical to the success of the process of change that the organisations are intending to achieve.

Two recent reports have reinforced the need to have key foundations in place before benchmarking can be successful (see American Quality Foundation and

Ernst & Young 1992; Macneil *et al* 1993). The highly user-friendly *NIES Benchmarking Self Help Manual* (1993) points these out, which are adapted here for the public sector, as follows:

- a *shared strategic view* (among both top management and staff) of the purpose, stakeholders (not just clients), strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the organisation
- a *commitment to adopt a consultative/participative culture* (that is, a broad commitment to and ownership of the process of change)
- a *'business process view' of the organisation*, that is, a conceptual holistic view rather than merely thinking of the organisation as discrete functional boxes
- *ability to analyse the organisation's 'business processes' rigorously* (the availability of trained staff, with the technical resources of the TQM process)
- *ability to initiate process improvements*
- *ability to convene and manage teams* (benchmarking is said to depend on the effectiveness of the people at the market interface participating in management improvement teams)
- *preparedness to commit the necessary people and time*
- *experience in project management*
- *having the 'right attitude' to competition, change, staff participation.*

### Conclusions

It is important for the evaluation practitioner to understand the definitions and models of this burgeoning field. It is revealing that most 'authorities' on benchmarking leave the process of evaluation as a minor subprocess of the various steps in the quality improvement processes, for example, they aggregate as one step such processes as: 'develop and test ideas' and 'implement solutions and evaluate' (Tenner & De Toro 1992, p 110). Perhaps it is appropriate for the evaluation practitioner to illuminate the subtleties which could make a great deal of difference to the quality of the information available to those using benchmarking. Indeed, there are subtleties we all need to be reminded of, as one commentator on benchmarking of computer software pointed out:

In the end, software performance evaluation comes back to human judgement – to the test pilot, the drama critic, the gourmet, or any individual. The complexity and variety of software packages, the individual tastes

and preferences, and the varying modes and environments all come into play to work against easy answers to the software evaluation problem. As in life itself, software and its users benefit from the rich diversity, the complex specialisation, the adaptability, birth, growth, and death of programs according to the same rules that have led to the existence of the programs' creators' (Boyle 1984, p 188).

It would be a salutary lesson for the new Minister referred to above (or the CEOs of the Minister's government departments) to reflect on how many of these 'foundation stones' they could build their benchmarking exercise upon. Ultimately, the success of benchmarking will probably rest upon careful and selective application of the method to those areas of the public sector, such as corporatising and commercialising agencies and GBES, in which it may be seen as relevant and useful. Hopefully, this process of experimentation will result in a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of public and non-profit administration, without too many casualties. Presumably this will lead to a more careful adaptation of commercial business methods for the operations of the public sector, where appropriate.

## Bibliography Resources Available to the Public Sector Manager

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## SCIP: FELLOW TRAVELLERS IN BENCHMARKING

It may be interesting to note the existence of *The Society of Competitor Intelligence Professionals (SCIP)*, which held its 1991 conference on 'Global Competitiveness: Competitive Intelligence Implications'.

The Society of Competitor Intelligence Professionals holds an annual conference inviting its members and other professionals to contribute papers or case study examples covering a wide variety of subjects including:

- benchmarking
- data analysis techniques
- financial analysis techniques
- information sources
- information-gathering techniques
- database design and use
- computer software packages and use
- disseminating/communicating results
- ethical/legal/security issues
- strategic planning synergies
- competitive pricing implications
- managing the competitive intelligence function
- interfacing with key executives/CI effectiveness
- gaining internal cooperation
- understanding global competitors
- international competitive intelligence
- training the competitive intelligence professional
- competitive intelligence in service organisations
- competitive intelligence and sales force interactions. ■