

Barriers to the Use of Benchmarking Information: Narratives from Local Government Managers

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In 2004, the provincial government of Quebec implemented an administrative reform applied to all 1,113 municipalities in that Canadian province. Since then, every municipality must collect and transmit information on mandatory standardized indicators to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Regions and Territorial Use. The purpose of our research is to examine and analyze the difficulties expressed by local managers in their implementation of the performance measurement initiative. Our research is based upon content analyses of (i) open-ended comments from 390 electronic surveys of local managers, and (ii) the follow-up focus groups of 179 participants representing 100 municipalities and municipal organizations. Our results are that managers most often do not take advantage of performance benchmarking information due to barriers related to their unwillingness to use it, rather than their inability or the idea that they are prevented from using it. The main contribution of this study resides in the identification of barriers to the uses of performance information by managers, in open-ended questions.

The concern about the underutilization of performance information in public organizations is not recent (de Lancer-Julnes 2000). Yang (2011) recently spelled out the general research question framing the burgeoning theory on performance management: “Why do some leaders choose to take advantage of a government-wide performance reform and promote performance information use within the agency to improve organizational effectiveness?” (Yang 2011, 168). The authors’ contribution is one of the latest in an increasing

number of empirical studies contributing to the framing of a theory on the determinants of the use of performance information by municipal governments (Berman and Wang 2000; de Lancer-Julnes and Holzer 2001; Wang and Berman 2001; Melkers and Willoughby 2005; Rogers 2006; Lu 2007; Johansson and Siverbo 2009; Moynihan and Pandey 2010, 850; Taylor 2011). The empirical studies on the uses of performance information share two characteristics. First, these researches focused on singling out the individual effects of determinants explaining the variations of performance information uses. These statistically sophisticated studies derive from self-administered survey data. Often times, all variables come from the same survey¹. Second, the determinants of uses are specific to each survey sent to local managers². For example Moynihan and Pandey (2010, 860) included in their statistical analysis of determinants of use, variables like public service motivation, reward expectation, flexibility, and professional influence.

This is not to say that all research relies on multivariate regression analyses or complex cultural and organizational behaviors. Previous research on the use of performance information has relied on using statistical techniques such as descriptive or bivariate analyses, or simple concept influencing performance information use such as perceived benefits and barriers³. A study of Swedish municipalities (Siverbo and Johansson 2006) presented in a descriptive manner perceived benefits (281-282) and perceived barriers of uses (283-284). A study of Canadian municipalities listed the three most frequently perceived barriers of use of performance information (Pollanen 2005, 17). Other research used bivariate correlations of uses and perceived benefits of performance measurement (Rogers 2006, 122-130). These studies, much like other statistically relevant research enumerated earlier, rely on survey data. Previous studies request survey takers to take a position on a predetermined list of statements regarding complex cultural and organizational behaviors, benefits, and barriers.

The main contribution of the present study resides in answering a question related to Yang's (2011, 68): Why don't some leaders choose to take advantage of a government-wide performance reform and promote performance information use within the agency? From answers provided by managers to open-ended questions, we identify and analyze the barriers to the uses of performance information that are encountered in a municipal intelligence regime with few constraints on managers (Charbonneau 2011). In doing so, we hope to illustrate what could be inherent difficulties in using performance information in the public sector. The foundations of this study are content analyses of (i) comments from 390 electronic surveys of local managers, and (ii) the follow-up focus groups of 179 different participants representing 100 municipalities and municipal organizations. We aim at offering a list of factors that are more organic and less enforced than in previous studies. The barriers identified by local managers in the Canadian province of Quebec might assist future surveys seeking to explain the use of performance measurement in municipal settings.

In 2004, the provincial government of Quebec was the third province in Canada to go forward with reforms setting up a mandatory municipal performance regime. To this day, these are the only three instances of states/provinces mandating that every municipality on their territory must collect and transmit values for a predetermined set of performance indicators. This study presents the intrinsic difficulties that managers face as a result of a reform driven by performance measurement. The study sheds light on the struggles felt by

managers of all municipalities, including rural ones. Few studies on municipal reforms focus on small and very small municipalities. In our North-American sample, most of the managers work in municipalities of less than 2,000 residents.

The present study is organized as follows. First, we will present barriers to the use of performance information presented in previous studies as described and analyzed by the authors. Past research has examined obstacles by which the use of performance measurement has not been maximized, and its’ effectiveness as a municipal tool has thus been limited. Previous research has also sought to explain the methods by which such conclusions have come about as well as the approaches made to understand the barriers to benchmarking and their difficulties. Then, we will introduce and describe our methods of data collection from two sources. A discussion of the results will follow ending with the conclusion and future recommendations for research.

Review of the Literature

To comprehend the usage of performance information, one has to understand the mitigating factors. Several studies identified factors influencing the use of performance measures. Before addressing the findings of previous studies, one has to keep in mind that the barriers to performance management vary from the perceived shortcomings of performance measurement.

A starting point in identifying barriers to performance information usage is found in Johnsen (2005). The author draws lessons from the previous twenty-five years of the performance measurement literature in the public sector. Choosing from articles using deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning and empirical studies, he presents an inventory of the obstacles facing performance measurement. He classifies these obstacles in three categories: obstacles to implementation, obstacles to use, and obstacles to outcomes. The obstacles to use are worth exploring in this article. Table 1 presents the list of twelve obstacles identified as limiting the use of performance measurement in government.

Table 1. Obstacles (costs) associated with the use of performance measurement

	<i>Obstacles ('costs')</i>
<i>Use</i>	Lack of relevant statistics and data
	Measurement errors
	Misinterpretation
	Low decision relevance
	Running down of Pis
	Proliferation of Pis
	Information overload
	Indirect lines of responsibility (common agency)
	No ownership of performance
	Loyalty to professional norms rather than to management
	Misrepresentation (manipulation of data)
	'Creaming'

Source: adapted from Johnsen (2005, 11).

Johnsen's list is informative, but little is explained in his article about how the data was gathered to create this list.

Empirical studies on the use of performance measurement at the local level rely on surveys and interviews of municipal managers⁴. In a Canadian context, Pollanen (2005) analyzed 334 surveys from senior administrators in municipalities with populations greater than 5,000 in five Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland). The author found that the three top-rated factors limiting the development, use, and reporting of performance measures are: (1) the difficulty in identifying appropriate measures; (2) the difficulty in meaningful use of measures, and (3) the ambiguity of performance objectives (Pollanen 2005, 17). Another North American study often referred to is Poister and Streib's (1999) inquiry of the state of performance measurement in the United States. Their study is based on 159 municipal managers using a jurisdiction-wide performance measurement system. Some of the problems with performance measures studied by Poister and Streib (1999) overlap with Pollanen's limiting factors, like the timeliness of data collection, use and reporting (Poister and Streib 1999, 332).

Drawing from exploratory surveys, focus groups of managers and semi-structured interviews in the United Kingdom, McAdam and O'Neill (2002) unearthed perceived barriers in the use of performance measurement by managers. Recurring barriers emanating from the interviews were that:

1. Managers are aware of inconsistencies in measurement in relation to a number of indicators
2. Completion of time sheets in particular is not given priority in some areas
3. There is an urgent need to educate managers and staff in the interpretation of relevant information from performance measurement
4. Benchmarking clusters, set up under best value and involving clusters of similarly sized councils, have to date merely agreed to compare with one another, using the (minimum) key performance indicators; and
5. There is a need to set a realistic level of service, taking into account resources available (McAdam and O'Neill 2002, 452-453).

Many of the barriers presented by McAdam and O'Neill have to do with a perceived lack of complexity.

Siverbo and Johansson (2006) studied the use of performance measurement at the local level in Sweden. In a questionnaire to finance directors or equivalent staff members in all 290 Swedish municipalities, the authors asked municipal finance directors to express themselves on the obstacles to the implementation and use of RPE (relative performance evaluation). The list is organized in three categories: (1) obstacles related to how managers or organizations are unwilling or (2) unable to use performance measurement in their activities or (3) just prevent using it. Under the label "unwilling", the reasons presented are (1) RPE is considered a poor method, (2) users have a very low trust in ratios, (3) RPE is

felt to convey an incomplete picture of the organization, (4) there is a fear of RPE being misunderstood and misinterpreted (Siverbo and Johansson 2006, 283). By “unable”, the authors meant that municipalities would have a (1) lack of knowledge about RPE as a possible model, (2) lack of relevant comparison municipalities, (3) lack of available working time, and (4) lack of expertise for working with RPE (Siverbo and Johansson 2006, 283). Under the label “prevented”, there are obstacles such as (1) the municipality has an explicit or implicit policy against RPE, (2) our officials are uninterested, (3) RPE is seen as a threat, and (4) there is a fear of exposing possible weaknesses (Siverbo and Johansson 2006, 284).

Some of the barriers identified in this section have to do with the unavailability of context and data. In benchmarking systems and regimes, by design, access to comparative data is seldom an issue. However, it is worth noting that when access to comparative data is not an issue, the data often translates into better analytical information. The provincially-mandated municipal performance regime in the Canadian province of Quebec provides a setting where managers can express themselves on the barriers to the use of benchmarking information in their day to day operations.

Barriers to Benchmarking

Being a subset of performance measurement, benchmarking shares some of its impediment factors with it. However, the literature contains certain barriers that are seen as being more specific to benchmarking, like incrementalism (Drew 1997, 449; Davis 1998, 267). Some of the barriers to benchmarking are found more often in voluntary networks or benchmarking clubs. Among them are suspicions from unwilling managers (Davis 1998, 268; Lawton, McKeivitt and Millar 2000, 15), the obstruction of politicians (Lawton, McKeivitt and Millar 2000, 15) and the narrowness in the selection of partners (Holloway, Francis and Hinton 1999, 355). More barriers have been identified with the help of survey research. From survey data of NHS General Managers and management accountants based in the U.K., the barriers identified in descending order of frequency, were (1) difficulties in finding partners who were considered suitable comparators, (2) resource constraints (especially time), (3) access to other organizations, (4) staff resistance and (5) confidentiality (Holloway, Francis and Hinton 1999, 355).

Another survey research of 140 American private sector firms in voluntary benchmarking clubs showed the extent to which the following barriers were seen as impeding in these firms' benchmarking effort (Drew 1997). In order of acceptance comes: (1) time needed to conduct study, (2) reluctance of partners to share data, (3) lack of senior management support, (4) finding a project champion, (5) lack of knowledge/skills, (6) finding organizations to study, (7) finding suitable staff and team, (8) cost of conducting the study, (9) fear of disclosing information, (10) developing teamwork, (11) resistance to outside ideas, (12) lack of equipment and technology, (13) legal or regulatory considerations (Drew 1997, 438). By design, a few of these barriers *such time needed to conduct study, reluctance of partners to share data, finding organizations to study*, would not be observed in a mandatory benchmarking regime.

Several barriers to benchmarking are associated with structured mandatory performance regimes. Problems of thwarting accounting differences between various jurisdictions have

been offered to explain why benchmarking has not been embraced more widely at the state and local level (Foltin 1999, 44). Others pointed out that often managers claim that their organizations are unique from other organizations, so that comparisons would be meaningless (Ammons 1999, 105). Commenting on the reluctance of some local managers to go for external forms of benchmarking, Ammons and Rivenbark (2008) have suggested that managers purposefully limit themselves to internal benchmarking for defensive reasons. Comparison with one's own performance at earlier periods of time is important and reluctance to embrace external comparison is odd for a participant in a project designed primarily for that purpose. Such reluctance may reveal an inherent distrust of performance measurement, anxiety about the numbers being produced and what they will suggest about relative standing, or a lack of confidence in the organization's ability to improve performance (Ammons and Rivenbark 2008, 311).

Another reason to limit the use of benchmarking information is more psychological in nature and does not assume turf guarding (Drew 1997, 429) on the part of managers. Quite simply, individuals are more knowledgeable and comfortable about the characteristics of their organization than those of another. Internal characteristics also require less cognitive effort to recall and comprehend. For these reasons, internal reference points are particularly likely to be used when complex or difficult characteristics are being investigated (Yockey and Kruml 2009, 101).

Data and Methods

Our data originates from two different sources. The first source of data comes from two open-ended questions of a survey. The second source of data originates from focus groups organized by the Partners on Municipal Management Indicators Committee, which took place on January 28, 2010.

Survey Methodology

An electronic survey was sent to General Managers in all 1,113 municipalities the Canadian province of Quebec during the fall of 2009. Three hundred and ninety (390) surveys were received, for a response rate of 35%. The first question in the survey asked respondents if overall, the performance indicators: a) are used very often; b) are used often; c) are seldom used; d) are not used. The respondents were notified that if they answered "are not used", they were invited to develop their thoughts on the reasons on why the performance indicators are not used. Out of the 212 respondents who initially declared they do not use management indicators at all, 187 (88%) took the opportunity to explain why they did not do so in the open-text comment section. A content analysis of their replies was done. The units of analysis for the content analysis were ideas. It became evident that many comments expressed multiple ideas in reply to that question. No previous coding scheme was developed prior to the data collection.

At the conclusion of the survey, all respondents were given an opportunity to offer general comments regarding the management indicators: "If you have comments to formulate regarding the management indicators or the present survey, please add them in the space below." A total of 152 respondents, or almost 40%, seized the opportunity and offered comments. Ninety-nine of the 152 respondents answered earlier in the survey that the performance information was never used in their municipality. Many comments covered

various perceived barriers. Accordingly, analytical units coded from the answers to the open-ended questions are themes, and not comments. No coding scheme was prepared prior to the analysis of the data. There were no definite expectations on what respondents would say, as they could comment on any aspects of the management indicators.

Focus groups methodology

On January 28, 2010, municipal managers were invited to meet in Saint-Hyacinthe, QC, for a day of activities devoted to assessing the municipal management indicators since the beginning of the regime in 2004. Among the activities were a number of presentations from managers, two presentations from academics (including the lead author), presentations of best practices in the use of indicators by managers, and a discussion session for participants. A total of 179 participants representing 100 municipalities, MRCs⁵ and municipal agencies were present at this day of activities organized by the Partners on Municipal Management Indicators Committee, a coalition of professional associations and governmental agencies. Most of the participants were not the same managers who answered the survey. Evidently, the participants were motivated enough to travel and devoted an entire day to the indicators; they are a self-selected sample of managers. However, the participants were not all convinced veteran users of performance indicators. Anecdotally, at the beginning of the day, one keynote speaker asked the crowd to raise their hands if they considered themselves as users of performance information: roughly half raised their hands. Contrary to the survey, the sample for the focus groups was one of convenience. This being noted, it would have been daunting to organize focus groups with various managers in such a vast province, if managers were selected by representative stratified subsamples.

The focus groups involved discussing five selected findings on the use of performance information from the survey discussed earlier. The participants were divided in nineteen assigned groups of eight to ten participants. Participants were thereafter grouped according to the size of their municipalities. They were given instructions that one person per group should take notes about the participants recommendations, but only after a consensus was reached. Participants were requested to answer the five questions. They were asked to stick to the question and to forgo discussions about the relevancy of the indicators. This was deemed important in analyzing the focus group data, because the answers tend to be more proactive and less the work of nay-sayers as in the survey. Every fifteen to twenty minutes, the answer sheets were collected to make sure that each group would have enough time to answer each question. The entire focus group activities lasted 90 minutes.

Results

Survey

The results about the barriers to the use of benchmarking information contained in the comments of managers are presented below. Table 2 includes open-ended comments of managers explaining why they do not use the municipal management indicators. It also includes general comments about the indicators in the benchmarking regime. The nature of the comments from this general open-ended question available to all managers is almost identical to the comments from the question on why certain managers do not use the indicators.

Table 2. Reasons Given Why Management Indicators Are Not Used, and General Comments Formulated about the Management Indicators by Users and Non-Users

Barriers (grouped by themes)	Frequency		
	Reasons why Indicators are not used	General comments	
		Non-Users	Non-Users
Useless / do not see usefulness / no interest (managers)	66	21	8
Inherent difficulties for small municipalities	39	37	13
No interest from elected officials / incomprehension from mayor and-or council members	38	15	2
No time available	16	16	9
Lack of expertise / lack of personnel with expertise / lack	14	6	3
Simplistic / not realistic / not valid	14	10	8
No comparable municipality / impossible to compare municipalities with each other	13	8	6
Do not know what to do with performance information / difficulty in the interpretation of performance information (managers)	13	4	4
Limited use (present / past)	11	-	-
Accounting problems / cost accounting problems	8	1	3
Chaos	7	-	1
Difficulties based on indicators' churning	6	1	5
Difficulties with comparisons (software limitations)	5	1	3
Long delays in obtaining the data	2	1	0
Need for training / request for training	-	7	2
We have our own indicators	-	1	-
Others	2	5	18 ⁶
Total of comments	254	134	85
Total of respondents:	187	99	53

We present here the three most recurrent themes found in the survey. We also discuss the theme about the impossibility or comparing two municipalities together, even if it is not the fourth most common theme. This theme is paramount in benchmarking. It also surfaced in the focus groups. In the confined space of this article, it is not possible to focus on all sixteen themes encountered.

• *First Finding on Why Indicators are not Used from Non-Users – Perception of Uselessness*

The comments about the perceived uselessness are straightforward and unambiguous. Some examples illustrate a shared feeling from managers in Quebec who do not use the management indicators.

“These are not information that we use in our daily workday” [comment a23]

“I compile them every year since we have the obligation to do so. I have to tell you that they [the indicators] only add to the considerable number of numbers on paper. They are not used” [comment a49]

“This document on the management indicators has never been filled out by the city since 2003” [comment a68]

“We fill out the Ministry’s annual survey [referring the mandatory transmission of data to MAMROT], but after that, the municipality does not refer to it. For us, it is not considered as a tool” [comment a121]

“I have been in this municipality for 1½ years and I never referred to them to justify a project” [comment a59]

Some participants expressed that management indicators are not useful, that budgeting tools are superior, and that performance indicators do not supply better information.

“We already have other ways internally enabling us to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses; for example, prior years’ spending. The indicators usually confirm what we already know” [comment a105]

“We work instead with our financial reports to guide us and make necessary further corrections according to our situations along the years” [comment a108]

“We compare ourselves from year to year with our numbers in the financial statements and we take note of variations in the budget – no need for another tool. (...)” [comment a131]

An analysis of the comments above illustrate that some managers are indifferent and sometimes hostile to newer management tools such as performance measurement. Some of these managers whom do not use performance indicators openly state that they prefer to solely use other management tools such as budgets.

• *Second Finding Why Indicators are not Used from Non-Users – Inherent difficulties for Small Municipalities*

The second most common theme among managers that do not use performance information is that there are inherent difficulties for small municipalities to use the management indicators in their operations. Some of the comments simply state the perception that performance indicators are ill suited for small municipalities.

“It is very simple, the municipality is very small and he [not specified] does not feel the need to compare to other municipalities. The budget is done

from year to year according to the current needs.” [comment a18]

“There are only three employees and it is always a race, the budget is really carried through and we do [what we can] with our workforce” [comment a36]

“The municipality is so small that I only work 2 days/week, thus I never used this document at present” [comment a65]

“Possibly by lack of knowledge but also because municipal administration is very simple in a small village; as always, we find our answers elsewhere.” [comment a153]

Some mentioned that performance indicators are not needed in small municipalities because they think important performance improvements cannot happen in such a context.

“The indicators are not always realistic in small municipalities. The former do not have the budgets [resources] of cities, thus it is difficult to achieve large improvements. However, comparisons help to explain certain decisions.” [comment a72]

This theme about the incongruence between performance indicators and small municipalities is seldom found in the literature. Most North American studies are done with a sample of medium-sized municipalities (25K+ population) and little is known on how small and very small municipalities use, or in the present case cope, with performance measurement.

• *Third Finding Why Indicators are not Used from Non-Users – No or Little Interest from Elected Officials*

The other widespread theme emerging from the comments of managers who do not use indicators is that there is little or no interest from elected officials. Municipal elected officials in Quebec include the Mayor and council members. Here are some selected comments to that effect.

“No relationship with the municipality’s management and financial planning which is largely a political choice prioritize by elected officials” [comment a15]

“Elected officials have been here for many years and trust their experience to make decisions” [comment a63]

“Because elected officials cannot figure it [the indicators] out. They make the budget with the revenues, the spending, and the taxing rate are enough for them!” [comment a136]

“Every year I transmit a copy of the management indicators to elected officials, and they [the indicators] never raised interest (not a question) from them [elected officials]” [comment a185]

There are examples where the impediment of small size is compounded with uncooperative elected officials.

“Because we are a small municipality and Mister Mayor does not use this method because it is too complicated” [comment a140]

There are also examples where both managers and elected officials are allegedly opposed to the management indicators. The most explicit comment is:

“Useless uselessness... elected officials do not know that it [the indicators] exists and do not want to know about it, and for public servants, this task is useless and does absolutely not serve any purpose except clutter the file cabinet” [comment1a73]

These are just some examples representing numerous comments on the perceived lack of interest of politicians from local managers. The underlying assumption is that managers would use performance information more often if politicians would inquire about them.

• *Forth Finding Why Indicators are not Used from Non-Users – Perceived Incomparability of Municipalities*

Relatedly, a theme which earned traction with managers who do not use performance information is the perception that it is practically impossible to compare municipalities in terms of service delivery. Comments to that effect took the following forms:

“The indicators were invited by theoreticians (...) and it is impossible to compare 2 municipalities together” [comment a76]

“Do not understand the usefulness of comparisons with our neighbors” [comment 98]

“(…) Comparisons are always mistaken” [comment a118]

“For internal use only, because two municipalities cannot be compared (...)” [comment a159]

This theme was less prevalent with self-reported user of performance information.

• *General Comments from Managers Regarding Management Indicators*

We witnessed in Table 2 that the comments formulated to the general open-ended

question available to all managers are the same than the comments gathered from the question on why certain managers do not use the indicators. However, the proportions are not the same. Users are less likely to perceive barriers than non-users. Only four additional categories from the initial coding scheme were needed to code the comments from the second open-ended question. Moreover, these four categories captured a limited number of comments. All in all, the general comments for non-users were in fact reiteration of why the indicators are useless, too complicated to use, simplistic and impractical.

The general comments in Table 2 indicate that self-declared users and non-users perceive multiple problems and impediments to their use. Out of the 195 (134+85) themes that were present in the 152 (99+53) comments, two of the three widespread themes showed earlier are repeated. The lack of time seems to come up more often in this question than the absence of interest from elected officials. There are variations in the repartition of themes on the obstacles and impracticalities of indicators from users and non-users. However, as we mentioned, there is a consensus about commonly perceived problems.

One noteworthy comment was formulated by an individual with more than 20 years of experience as a dual General Manager–Chief Financial Officers in a municipality of less than 2,000 residents.

“The lack of time and personnel create difficulties for me to fill the survey [referring the mandatory transmission of data to MAMROT] within the time delays. When we [unspecified] want to represent the real picture of what is going on in a municipality, the necessary amount of time has to be put in. Nevertheless, after discussions with other municipal managers, they confirm they would not get headaches over this and that they would write down the same information than the previous year, with the exception of some information” [comment b45 (non-user of indicators) – emphasis added]

Referring to the mandatory data transmission form as a ‘survey’ is a reminder that performance data are not audited in Quebec’s municipal benchmarking regime. In that regard, the values for the indicators are obtained through self-administered surveys. According to that public servant, certain managers would simply not take the time to transmit accurate information about their municipal services. The idea that the data could be slightly inaccurate was also discussed by an Assistant-General Manager in a small municipality of less than 2000 residents.

“(…) The service directors should also be made aware of collecting data correctly, which is not the case in our [Quebec’s] small municipalities because the workload is too great for service directors and the General Manager. Thus, the management indicators are set aside, except for finances” [comment b46 (non-user of indicators)]

Another comment to that effect formulated by another General Manager in a small municipality of less than 2000 residents.

“(…) For small municipalities, most of the time, the management indicators are prepared hastily with the little information that we have” [comment b52 (non-user of indicators)]

This adds to the idea that the quality of the data, let alone the external comparative data, is seen as leaving much to be desired.

Another insight from the content analysis of the general comments has to do with the most frequent theme in the general comment section: the paucity of time. Here is what a General Manager-CFO working in a municipality of less than 2,000 residents had to say about the scarcity of time to use performance indicators.

“When I started my functions in 2005, the management indicators seemed like a task to be accomplished by the GM/CFO. Information to collect and all and all. After discussion with my colleagues (ADMQ⁸) the necessity of the management indicators is not motivated. *For many of us, it is only two (2) hours spent on a software to complete a document that will end up in the garbage when presented to council members*” [comment b59 (non-user of indicators) - *emphasis added*]

Given the annual basis of data transmission to MAMROT, the two hours this manager is referring to are two hours spent in a year. In contrast, here is another comment made by yet another General Manager of a municipality of less than 2,000 residents.

“Without software which provides comparatives, it is not very useful for us; *we work a lot with the budget and its bimonthly follow-up*” [comment b87 (non-user of indicators) - *emphasis added*]

The contrast between devoting two hours a year to performance information collecting and transmission, and working on budget follow-ups twice a month is evident. The comments for the open-ended survey questions reveal that managers have many recriminations about the very idea of having their municipality being measured.

Focus Groups of Municipal Actors on the Use of Management Indicators

Participants were instructed to answer five questions for discussion. Each question was introduced by a finding from the survey conducted at the end of 2009. The proportions in the preamble of the question are related to findings from the survey. The participants may or may not have answered the survey a few months before the focus groups. The first question discussed by managers was the following:

Use and integration of management indicators in my municipality.

59% of users and 81% of non-users who answered the survey say they do

not know how to include the management indicators in their decisions.

Q1.1 According to you, what are the actions and initiatives that could be put forward to foster use and inclusion of the municipal management indicators to introduce them in your decisions?

Recurring themes from the nineteen groups were made to be stricter with the transmission deadline of performance information. It squared with other suggestions about integrating the performance information into the budget cycle.

“Introduce in the budget process” [suggestion from an unidentified group]

“Mandate the auditor to take a stand, to make an audit of the indicators; mandatory to report in the financial statements, because elected officials are not interested” [suggestion from group #19]

“Presentation in the budget process” [suggestion from group #4]

Requests to move toward performance budgeting is surprising in these follow-up focus groups, as the results from the survey are that even symbolic uses of performance information is not widespread in the province of Quebec. However, they were only three suggestions in regard to performance budgeting out of the nineteen groups. Another theme about stepping up performance management that was present in the suggestions is the development of objectives or targets. Four focus groups reached a consensus that objectives/targets would help including the indicators into their decision making.

The second question on which participants had to express themselves was a follow-up question to Question 1.1.

Use and integration of management indicators in my municipality.

59% of users and 81% of non-users who answered the survey say they do not know how to include the management indicators in their decisions.

Q1.2 How could we make all managers include their indicators in their management style?

Question 1.2 was somewhat similar to Question 1.1. Accordingly, answers for the second question were similar to the ones for the first question. Of the various findings, two suggestions were made on how to integrate indicators into management style. The shared theme is about making performance management look less threatening. In one group, participants felt that a demonstration to managers that performance indicators are a tool which allowed for better decision-making is warranted. Other groups of managers spoke about the neces-

sity of promoting indicators as a management tool rather than a performance measurement tool. These suggestions were not shared by other focus groups. It is noteworthy that two groups of managers found it necessary to express their concerns about how indicators are seen as judgmental and as a replacement of managers' discretion. Quebec's municipal benchmarking system is purportedly non-intrusive and non-threatening (Charbonneau 2011).

Question 2 was about a topic that was raised in the comments from the survey that is the perception of indicators as a simplistic tool.

Portrait.

70% of users and 86% of non-users mentioned in the survey that management indicators paint an incomplete image of municipal services

Q2. According to you, what could paint a complete image of all services?

Some groups mentioned that it would be impossible to have a complete image of all services. One comment to that effect is especially telling, as it can be linked with the fear of being measured. An asterisk was added to the comment of one focus group to the effect that:

“*never a complete image, but it would be favorable to each municipality, but acceptable to all” [suggestion from group #9]

This suggestion is of interest in light of the encountered themes. The two following irreconcilable themes are about suggestions to add indicators or to replace mandatory indicators, and let municipalities develop their own indicators. Even if this group did not completely agree with the question at hand about the complete depiction of municipal services, other groups suggested that was important to:

“Train to explain how it is a tool and not a judgment” [suggestion from group #17]

For a few managers, the relevant issue would be about portraying a complete (picture?) of municipal services, as it is would be about painting the performance of several municipalities as being suboptimal. This brings us to Question 3.

Question 3 was there to foster discussion about the perception that management indicators would be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Interpretation.

82% of users and 93% of non-users mentioned in the survey that they fear that the management indicators would be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Q3. What would enable you to avoid the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of results of the management indicators?

A suggestion that was shared by some of the focus groups was to include attenuat-

ing factors not only in reporting, but also in the online anonymous database of the password-protected portal accessible to managers. Three noteworthy suggestions have in common a very defensive stance vis-à-vis performance indicators. On the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of results of the management indicators, groups of managers expressed that it could be avoided:

“Not using the indicators to create competition” [suggestion from group #7]

Another focus group reached consensus with a very similar idea.

“Explain and “do not judge” [suggestion from group #17]

One comment is even more telling variant of the no competition/no judgment theme.

“See if MAMROT could analyze global data and notify cities that are outside the average so they could verify their numbers, identify the influential factors” [suggestion from group #19]

What is implied is that the values of indicators are due to errors of calculations and exogenous factors influencing the data. Some managers found it unconceivable that some municipalities stray away from the mean value of an indicator because services are performed more or less efficiently. This is linked to the fifth and last question asked to participants.

Question 4 was about opinion that comparisons between municipalities are impossible and should not be done.

Comparison.

Among the obstacles to the use of management indicators, 67% of users and 81% of non-users mentioned in the survey, identified the impossibility to compare their municipality's results to other comparable municipalities.

Q4. Other than MAMROT's software, what are the means, according to you, which could help you compare your results to those of similar municipalities.

The suggestions to this question were much less defensive than those of previous questions. There were also expressed demands to create informal groups of municipalities, akin to benchmarking clubs, where data would be exchanged, analyzed and discussed jointly. There were also many demands for MAMROT to change the online database in the password-protected portal to enable queries that are either based on something else than size, or even cases where anonymous queries would be put aside for more flexible ones. This would mean a comparative tool not unlike a tool used in another provincially-mandated performance regime's tool: Ontario's *Municipal Performance Measurement Program* MIDAS tool.

Overall, what transpires from the discussions registered in the focus groups is that municipalities resent being measured and possibly compared, even if comparisons are not released to the public.

Discussion

At first, it might be surprising to witness this level of opposition to management indicators. The findings here diverge from what Ho (2006) observed in the American Midwest. When surveying mayors in that region of the United States, the author found that:

Among smaller cities with populations between 10,000 and 75,000, about one-third of the mayors reported that they frequently discussed the results with their staff during the year, and another one-third discussed the results occasionally each year. Among cities with populations between 75,000 and 100,000, the overwhelming majority (80 percent) were also occasional or frequent users of performance information. (Ho 2006, 222)

The provincially-mandated local government reform about the indicators started in 1999, after consultations with a myriad of municipal associations and associations of managers, CFOs, and accountants. Pilot projects about the indicators started between May 2001 and May 2002. Data collection for the 19 mandatory indicators started for every Quebec municipality in 2003. Since 2005, it has been mandatory for municipalities to make the internal benchmarking data public. Depositing the values for the indicators during a council meeting fulfills the mandate of ‘making the data public.’ In 2007, after consultations with professional associations, the collection and reporting of several indicators were discontinued.

Furthermore, there are no consequences for municipalities from MAMROT, no matter the value of the indicators. MAMROT does not even specify what constitute good, bad, better or worse performance. In the current electronic portal where all the data are gathered, managers need a password to access comparative data. Even there, in the password protected electronic tool, comparative data is aggregated and anonymous. The public is left out. Compared to other mandatory municipal benchmarking initiatives in the provinces of Ontario and Nova-Scotia; and in Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Britain, Norway, and New South Wales, Australia, it is the most opaque, lenient and non-threatening. Proponents of performance measurement can wonder on what grounds a sizeable proportion of municipal managers in Quebec feel hostility to such an undemanding system that was implemented gradually with ample participation from practitioners.

One of the distinctive characteristics of municipalities in Quebec is that there are numerous small villages. In these very small municipalities, there are often only a handful of administrative employees. Sometime, the entire bureaucracy in these municipalities is a single employee, who might be working part time. Management indicators are seen as an addition to their task. The comments about the inapplicability of performance indicators in small municipalities should not be dismissed out of hand. The perceptions of many municipal managers in small rural municipalities are that indicators are burdensome and time consuming: they would be impractical. Recurrent themes about the complexity of performance

indicators, the burdensome and heavy nature of using performance indicators are frequent. This seems to be the perception. Once this is said, one has to ponder if using internal and external comparative data is more complex than an annual budget. The lack of time, which is another frequent perceived impediment to use performance information needs to be nuanced. Comparative performance information has been packaged by MAMROT (and formally by CPEGM) for years. On the other hand, managers have to prepare the annual budget themselves, often months in advance.

The perception of managers that uncooperative elected officials are impediments to the use of performance indicators is not new. A recent Australian study (Taylor 2009) had similar findings. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews of twenty-four high-ranking state officials throughout Australia revealed that managers perceived that politicians were less committed to performance measurement than managers would prefer. Some of the quotes from her interviews are telling:

“I don’t know that the politicians take them [PIs] seriously. I can see how they are a good mechanism for accountability, but I am not convinced that politicians see it that way. . . we try to inform politicians and all the rest of it, but I think they’ve got other agendas, unfortunately . . . Their agenda is to get re-elected and to stay in office and all that.” (Taylor 2009, 862)

“It is fair to say that judgments and decisions made by politicians, by their very nature are politically focused, and it would take an exceptional piece of performance information to turn them around.” (Taylor 2009, 862)

The comments are from state officials instead of municipal officials; they refer to Ministers and not to Mayors and council Members; and originate from the other side of the globe. Nevertheless, they reverberate with the experience of local managers in Quebec. Furthermore, most of the recurring themes from table 2, with the exception of the theme about small municipalities, can be equated with a Swedish list of twelve barriers (Siverbo and Johansson 2006, 283-284). There are overlaps between previous lists of barriers or obstacles to greater use of performance (Poister and Streib 1999, 332; McAdam and O’Neill 2002, 452-453; Johnsen 2005, 11; Pollanen 2005, 17) and the comments of municipal managers in Quebec. The similarities between responses from Swedish municipal managers, comments from top state managers in Australia and the comments of municipal managers in Quebec regarding the barriers or obstacles to greater use of performance. Internationally, managers who operate in diverse performance management regimes with different characteristics express similar reasons to explain why they do not use performance information more. Independently of the form of the regime, targets, rankings or intelligence (Hood 2007, 96), there might be constants inherent in performance information use. These constants might explain why public managers do not feel compelled to use information they are suggested or ordered to collect, compile, transmit and report.

The theme presented earlier about the impossibility of comparing municipal services can be at surprising within a benchmarking regime. This is at odds with the official po-

sition by MAMROT, which suggest that comparisons should be made. An example of this idea means can be appreciated for water treatment. Water quality in Quebec is bounded by the *Règlement sur la qualité de l'eau potable* [Ruling on the quality of potable water] (c. Q-2, r.18.1.1) under the *Loi sur la qualité de l'environnement* [Law on Environmental Quality] (L.R.Q., c. Q-2, a. 31, 45, 45.2, 46, 87, 109.1 & 124.1). It imposes strict guidelines on many aspects of water treatment. Among them are: operator's training; bacteriological, physico-chemical controls and norms; specification of water trucks; minimal numbers of water sampling modulated by population size; standardized technical guides for articles 53 and 53.0.1 implementation; and standardized weekly data transmission forms. Despite all of these guidelines, the opinion of many managers is that there would be in Quebec for the 925 municipalities (out of 1113) who do offer a water treatment service, 925 different and irreconcilable sets of goals about the quality of water. The cost of their respective treatment could not be compared in any ways. The same line of thought would hold true on other municipal services like snow plowing and street repairs.

Lastly, managers who made comments mentioned that they lack the time to work with management indicators. Many complained that collecting performance information necessary for the transmission on the mandatory indicators was too time consuming. Two different managers from small municipalities of less than 2,000 residents revealed more about the efforts and times that were devoted to performance indicators and the budget. In one case, a General Manager wrote that he/she (and other counterparts) would spend two hours a year to collect and transmit the information on the indicators to MAMROT. The transmission form was referred to as a 'survey'. This was not the only time the form was referred as such. In another case, a General Manager explained that bimonthly follow-ups were done for the budget. This contrast in devoted time and energy, both from managers who admittedly do not use performance indicators, is manifest. This put the frequent 'lack of time' theme in a different light. Two hours to devote to a 'survey' is indeed a lot of time. We leave to the reader the judgment about the validity of the 'lack of time' argument, when two hours a year are devoted to a management tool that is supposed to complement other management tools.

There are managers, who either would like performance indicators to go away, or they would like them to be devoid of external comparisons or any form of evaluation. If analyses would be done, it should be in such a way that none of the 1113 municipalities are identified as offering one service that is deemed suboptimal. This, of course, flies in the face of the spirit behind performance measurement, where comparisons are sought to foster transparency or performance improvement.

Conclusion

The main finding of this research is that the barriers to the use of performance information at the local level in Quebec reverberates with experiences found in performance initiative in other Western countries. Municipalities in various states, provinces, countries differ in their responsibilities, institutional arrangements, political structures, and in the nature and extent of their performance management initiatives or regimes. However, municipalities in settings as diverse as Canadian provincially-mandated regimes, American local initiatives,

nationally-mandated regime in the United Kingdom, and a national voluntary initiative in Sweden have in common their perceived barriers and recriminations explaining their use of performance measurement. In other words, although a variety of performance measurement benchmarks and standards exist among an eclectic variety of municipalities, by and large the problems and issues are the same with regard to organization change and local government reform. The success of local governments who are interested in creating positive reform outcomes depends in part on understanding and solving specific and unique problems that plague their municipalities. Additionally managers must know how and where to navigate political waters when conversing with city officials, especially mayors.

Using Siverbo and Johansson's (2006) terminology, the barriers of benchmarking information use identified by open-ended managers' comments are more often related to the unwilling barrier than the unable and presented barriers. Decision makers should take note that an administrative reform like a performance regime might be resented and resisted by managers, even if the regime itself is designed to be non-threatening.

Future Research

One recommendation for future research would be to engage in onsite observational research in municipalities in order to inform us about the complexity and the actual time devoted to the use of performance information and the preparation of the annual budget. Additional research would include, but not be limited by, asking managers specific questions regarding their comfortableness in lieu of usage of data that can be easily quantified and digested.

Moreover, more qualitative research using open-ended questions about operational goals would be needed to assess if there are similarities and recurring themes in objectives that are pursued by municipalities. Future studies on the presence of comparisons between municipalities on managers' remuneration could observe the proportion of managers that are consequent about their 'no comparisons are possible' stance.

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Notes

¹ There is yet to be a study taking advantage of observed uses of performance information.

² Moynihan and Pandey (2010, 863) is a notable exception.

³ As an example, uses and benefits of performance measurement were included in a study of mid-sized American cities (Chung 2005, 140), but not to explain its use.

⁴For an example of empirical study on the use of performance information at the state level, see O'Leary and Pizzarella (2008)

⁵MRCs are regional instances that coordinate and plan efforts of neighboring municipalities

⁶Most of these comments by users are not barriers, but rather neutral or positive comments about the indicators.

⁷After verifications, there do not seem to be performance information for that municipality in MAMROT's database for 2006, 2007 and 2008.

⁸A professional association of municipal directors of small municipalities.

Acknowledgement

We would also like to thank the Ministère des Affaires municipales, des Régions et de l'Occupation du territoire (MAMROT) of Quebec for their support with the 2009 managers' survey. We are also grateful to François Bellavance and Michel Guindon, professors at HEC Montréal, for their financial support. The views expressed in this article are our own: they do not represent the position of the MAMROT. We also thank the reviewers for their comments.

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