

Robert K. Christensen
Brigham Young University

Tobin Im
Seoul National University

Gregory Porumbescu
School of Public Affairs and Administration,
Rutgers-Newark
Department of Public Administration,
Yonsei University

Softening Performance's Pitfalls by Integrating Context and Capacity: A Government Competitiveness Framework

Viewpoint Article

Abstract: *This article argues that government performance is better understood and managed within a broader competitiveness framework. Government competitiveness recursively integrates performance with organizational capacity and context. We illustrate this more holistic view with recent COVID-19 examples as well as recent scholarship, including some recent PAR publications related to this topic.*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments were frequently compared and ranked using performance metrics such as testing capacity, the reproduction number, the daily death count, and (more recently) the number of vaccines administered. By informing external evaluations of government performance, these simple metrics shaped priorities and impacted the way governments responded to the pandemic. Yet to what extent did these numbers accurately depict how well a given government responded to the pandemic?

As this example of response to COVID-19 illustrates, performance management efforts that rely on holding governments accountable for quantified performance outcomes are widespread. They are also fraught. A common critique of efforts to evaluate government performance using quantitative performance indicators is that this reductionist approach will underemphasize administrative processes and overlook the crucial but intangible forms of support that public institutions offer. For example, while there has been a strong emphasis on COVID-19 vaccination rates in the United States, less attention has been paid to addressing health equity concerns and overcoming structural barriers preventing access to healthcare, such as vaccines (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). Not surprisingly, a closer look at vaccination data in the United States points to marked gaps between racial and ethnic groups. An important question, therefore, is to what extent performance outcomes that are easily operationalized, such as the number of individuals vaccinated, are prioritized over values that are more difficult to operationalize, such as equity.

Evidence suggests that the risk of such displacement is real and is abetted by performance management regimes that emphasize outcome-based accountability, among other things. By shifting the locus of performance away from processes and toward individual managers, these performance regimes tacitly emphasize readily observable and easily quantifiable performance outcomes as a basis for accountability and emphasize personal over organizational responsibility (Jakobsen et al. 2018). The net effect is often detrimental. In one prominent example from the United States Veterans Health Administration Facilities, administrators responded to results-driven management practices by prioritizing waiting times over treatment, resulting in veterans going without treatment and ultimately dying (Lamothe 2014). In another case stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers and school administrators in Atlanta, Georgia admitted to altering students' standardized exams due to pressure from the high-stakes testing practices employed by the school district, in which principals and teachers were pressed to achieve high marks on standardized tests by any means (Flock 2011).

While evidence of the pitfalls of relying on performance regimes that stress quantitative performance measures abound, efforts to address these shortcomings often focus on increasingly sophisticated measurement schemes but neglect broader correlates of performance. This article advocates the adoption of performance management regimes that are contextualized in a competitiveness framework. Ho and Im (2012, 13) define competitiveness as "the power of government to, in light of various constraints, take resources from in and outside of the country and improve social, economic and cultural conditions of the nation in order to sustainably enhance citizens'

Robert K. Christensen is Professor and George W. Romney Research Fellow at the Romney Institute of Public Service and Ethics in the Marriott School of Management at Brigham Young University. His research examines pro- and anti-social motives and behaviors among public service employees. He co-edits the Cambridge University Press Elements Series in Public and Nonprofit Administration.
Email: rc@byu.edu

Tobin Im is professor and public administration scholar at the Graduate School of Public Administration at Seoul National University. He specializes in public management, organization theory, and comparative administration. Im serves as director of Center for Government Competitiveness.
Email: tobin@snu.ac.kr

Gregory Porumbescu is associate professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) at Rutgers University–Newark. He is the interim executive director of the New Jersey Policy Lab and the associate director of the Transparency and Governance Center (TGC). His research interests primarily relate to public sector applications of information and communications technology and digital inclusion.
Email: greg.porumbescu@rutgers.edu

Authors listed alphabetically to denote equal contribution.

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quality of life.” In other words, competitiveness encompasses an entity’s ability to learn from and adjust to environmental demands to create value and fulfill its distinct mission.

Taking stock of the past work in this domain (Holmberg, Rothstein, and Nasiritousi 2009; Hood 2012; Poister and Streib 1999) and calls for the development of hybrid performance management regimes (Jakobsen et al. 2018), the authors of this article argue the importance of management practices that allow organizations to account for their own capacity and adjust to the unique circumstances of the context they operate in. This approach is better able to capture intangible forms of value and learning processes than is an emphasis upon quantifiable outcome-based performance measures. The utility of this framework is that it connects context and capacity to performance (see figure 1, which is explained later) and, in so doing, promotes truly competitive management practices that strengthen an organization’s efforts to fulfill its distinct mission.

The balance of this article proceeds as follows. The next section provides an overview of performance-oriented government modernization efforts and discusses how efforts to quantify the progress that results from such reform movements frequently undercuts the movements’ effectiveness. In short, the section makes a case for the pitfalls of a myopic focus on performance. Following this section, the article reviews research advocating the importance of supplementing quantitative performance measurement practices with more flexible approaches that allow managers to account for the capabilities, capacities, and distinctive contexts they operate in. The article explains how integrating capacity and context with performance will strengthen the contributions of performance management practices to the intangible outcomes the government modernization efforts strive for. In other words, this article outlines a competitiveness framework that features performance but not to the exclusion of other key dynamics—capacity and context—that can help managers understand how performance metrics, on their own, are not enough.

The Pitfalls of Performance Management

Government modernization efforts originated in the years following World War II, which saw states around the world move away from “traditional military-bureaucratic ideas of ‘good administration’” and toward more flexible and ostensibly client-oriented administrative practices (Hood 1991, 5). These modernization efforts can be seen, in part, as a response to declining trust in government around the world and the belief that poor government performance was to blame (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003). The states’ intellectual bases, however, were informed by public choice theory and managerialism, which conflict with one another at a fundamental level because public choice theory emphasizes formal controls in the form of rules and regulations to discipline public bureaucracies, whereas managerialism views such rules and regulations as barriers in the path to results (Aucoin 1990; Hood 1991). More concisely, modernization efforts contributed to a paradoxical situation whereby bureaucratic discretion was simultaneously construed as the cause of and the solution to governments’ poor performance.

While modernization efforts have diverging views on the best path forward for a “field that is short of legitimacy” (Moynihan 2009, 814), an enduring point of consensus is the need for performance-

based accountability and management systems capable of communicating the performance results (Bouckaert and Peters 2002). The hope is that the creation of these systems will not only guide the performance of public organizations in a particular direction but also make performance easier to evaluate. Yet in many cases, these systems have been and continue to be developed in a one-size-fits-all fashion that downplays the distinctiveness of the task being managed (Radin 2006) and the values that different public organizations advance. Service delivery is modified to fit performance management practices, not the other way around. The result of these performance-based accountability and management systems is that they frequently displace the broad objectives of the reforms they were created to support.

New Public Management, with its emphasis on quantified performance metrics, contracted service provision, and performance-based accountability, is a canonical example of the myriad ways in which dogmatic performance management practices thwart modernization (Ho and Im 2015; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Yet the same issues present themselves in more contemporary reform trends. Take the case of smart cities. These sophisticated, data-intensive reform efforts rely on sensors and algorithms to improve the control and coordination of public services in urban settings (Nam and Pardo 2011). In theory, smart cities adapt service provision to fit a dynamic context (Glasmeier and Christopherson 2015). In practice, the technology and algorithms that guide smart city service delivery come from a limited number of third parties that rely on canned performance metrics (Albino, Berardi, and Dangelico 2015). In other words, service provision is adapted to meet the constraints of technology rather than the context.

A major problem with performance management systems is their tendency to prioritize technocratic values over democratic values

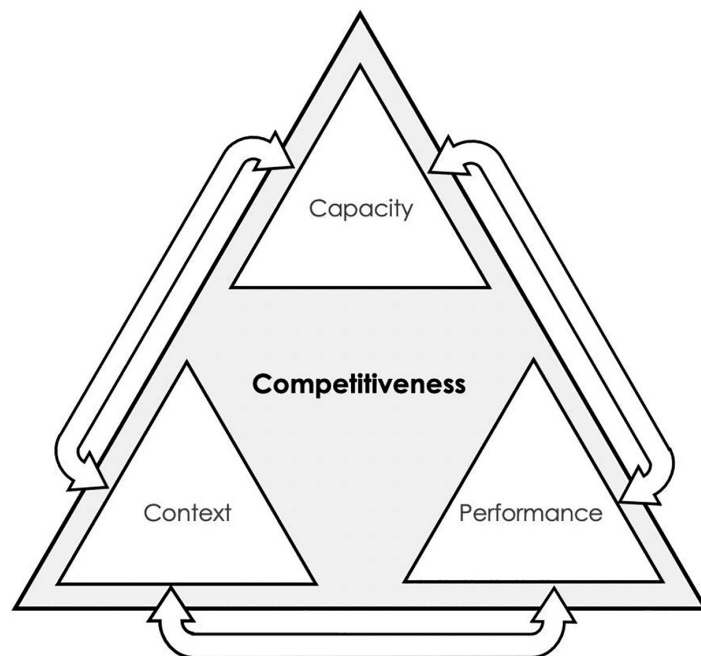


Figure 1 Government Competitiveness: Integrating Performance with Context and Capacity

(Radin 2006). This is not to say that these systems never work or should not be adopted. Rather, the argument is that one-size-fits-all approaches to performance management result in public services that sacrifice important features and distinct public values. This point aligns with arguments about the importance of adopting adaptive management frameworks (Jakobsen et al. 2018). This article furthers the argument by illustrating how more flexible performance management regimes can be adapted to address the needs of the distinctive capacities and contexts in which they are applied.

Integrating Performance Management with Context and Capacity

A tacit assumption throughout performance management research is that performance is a function of context and organizational capacity. Below, we make explicit these relationships, outlining the roles that context and organizational capacity play in shaping performance in public organizations.

Context

A well-developed line of research explores the role of sector (Lee, Petrovsky, and Walker 2020; Perry and Rainey 1988) and public service motives (Christensen et al. 2013) in shaping performance management regimes and outcomes. To highlight one contextual example related to sector, Latham, Borgogni, and Petitta (2008) observe that “goal setting theory states that situational factors are a moderator for the effect of a goal on performance” and that public sector goals often intentionally lack the kinds of goal specificity common in the private sector (398).

Public management research has also examined the relevance of administrative tradition as a course of context (Jensen, Sum, and Flynn 2009; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2015; Van der Wal, Mussagulovala, and Chen 2021; Welch and Wong 1998). A common approach to studying the interplay between performance management regimes and context is through a lens of public values (Brown, Potoski, and Van Slyke 2006; Van der Wal and Mussagulovala 2020). While this work has proven invaluable for describing how a mismatch between performance regimes and the underlying values in a given context can trigger unintended consequences, there is still a great deal of uncertainty in terms of how context drives performance management practices. In order to address this ambiguity, the following section outlines a series of general propositions and illustrates how they can be applied to understand the different ways in which context can impact performance.

Capacity

In addition to more explicitly connecting performance to context, this article contends that performance should be better integrated with capacity. As Christensen and Gazley (2008, 265) observed,

The emphasis on performance introduces the possibility that its predicates have been comparatively neglected or, at least, partially isolated from performance-based research and applications. Organizational “capacity” and “performance” in the broadest sense describe the “inputs” and the “outputs” (or “outcomes”) of management systems. Ingraham et al. (2003) conceive of this connection as a link between organizational resources, management characteristics and policy results.

Many authors have reiterated that performance cannot be fully understood without accounting for capacity. Hill and Lynn (2005) and Ryu and Christensen (2019) focus on the role of organizational capacity in understanding performance. Thomson and Perry (2006) and Agranoff and McGuire (2001) underscore capacity’s role in collaborative or networked performance arrangements. Hou and Moynihan (2008) and Park and Matkin (2021) connect capacity to fiscal performance and sustainability. Christensen and Lægreid (2020), Christensen, Lægreid, and Rykkja (2016), and Cavalcante and Pereira (2019) all link capacity to the performance of various public policies. Kropf et al. (2020) and Schmidhuber, Ingrams, and Hilgers (2021) highlight the role of capacity for citizen outcomes, including public trust and election management. Schattelman and Li-Yin (2018) even show a positive link between capacity and performance information use (see also Moynihan, Beakgaard, and Jakobsen 2020, discussed later).

Linking Context, Capacity, and Performance: A Competitiveness Framework with Illustrations

The links between context, capacity, and performance lead to the primary argument: performance is a function of context and organizational capacity. Figure 1 visually depicts these relationships. This article argues that this set of relationships is recursive—organizational performance is determined by context and capacity, but it also influences these constructs.

The primary purpose of this model is to point out that an overemphasis on performance often leads to neglecting key dynamics—context and capacity—that can more fully explain an organization’s processes, learning, and—more generally—competitiveness. The multi-level applicability of this framework is illustrated below.

Illustrations

These arguments are illustrated by three recent PAR publications, all part of the *Research Symposium: Advancing Government Quality through Capacity and Competitiveness* that highlight different aspects of the model suggested in this article. These papers flow, in part, from conferences and conversations co-hosted between Seoul National University’s Center for Government Competitiveness and (a) Bocconi University in January 2018 and (b) Arizona State University in January 2019.

First, Moynihan, Beakgaard, and Jakobsen’s (2020) “Tackling the Performance Regime Paradox: A Problem-Solving Approach Engages Professional Goal-Based Learning” contextualizes performance in a way that is both consistent with and illustrative of the model presented in the previous section. By studying performance data use, they show that process matters. When the push to use performance data are insensitive to the capacity and expertise of those expected to use the data, the push will be ineffective at best and frequently counter-productive. Managers who “use data to facilitate problem-solving, which is associated with greater goal-based learning” (1007) will find greater success because this approach relies on the capacity and expertise of professionals, bringing “insight into the causes behind organizational performance, as well as the levers to improve results” (1001).

Bello-Gomez (2020) provides important insights at a different level. While Moynihan, Beakgaard, and Jakobsen (2020) focus on the employee level and on the performance component of the model, Bello-Gomez's "Interacting Capacities: The Indirect National Contribution to Subnational Service Provision" focuses on national- and subnational-organizational levels and the capacity component of the model. In particular, his work evidences the critical role that capacities (national and subnational) play in providing education, measured in "quantity of outputs [enrollment data] and effectiveness [dropout and fail rates]" (1016). Drawing direct implications for the relationship between capacity, program performance outputs, and effectiveness (outcomes), Bello-Gomez demonstrates key pre-performance relationships that must be considered: "national governments interested in raising overall performance in service provision should consider the distribution of their capacity to [subnational units] that are less endowed or less capable to provide related services." His work underscores that a deeper understanding of performance relies on a deeper understanding of capacity, as both a singular and an interactive concept.

Deslatte and Stokan's (2020) "Sustainability Synergies or Silos? The Opportunity Costs of Local Government Organizational Capabilities" similarly focuses on local government but with additional insights into the model discussed herein, particularly on context. A city's context, in terms of levels of competition for development, is related to performance management. In addition, Deslatte and Stokan focus on tightening the relationship between organizational competencies and capacities by increasing the attention given to the concept of capabilities. Capability type matters. In their work on local government sustainability (greenhouse gas reduction) efforts, Deslatte and Stokan find that traditional economic development capabilities lead to certain less-sustainable outcomes. However, capabilities focused on economic development and strategic planning yield more sustainable outcomes.

These articles and those cited in the Context and Capacity subsections provide the opportunity to articulate a broad set of questions and to test the framework offered in this article. This article's review of the literature is not intended to be exhaustive but illustrative. Indeed, there is value in a future, systematic literature review around the competitiveness framework. The authors of this article recognize that some of the framework's constituent relationships have been better established (e.g., that capacity influences performance) than others (e.g., the relationship between context and performance). The authors also enthusiastically recognize several very recent efforts, not reviewed here that inform this topic (see also Ansell et al. 2021; Suryanarayan and White 2021).

Synthesizing arguments made up to this point, the authors of this article identify four questions that serve as a diagnostic framework to identify performance's potential pitfalls. Managers would do well to regularly raise and answer these questions in their respective organizations.

Q1: How do context and organizational capacity influence one another?

Q2: How do organizational capacity and performance influence one another?

Q3: How do context and organizational performance influence one another?

Q4: In what ways can competitiveness be enhanced through the management of the dynamic relationship between context, capacity, and performance?

Practical efforts are already underway to better account for and contextualize performance. For example, the Hertie School's *Governance Indicators Reports* constitute a meaningful step in this direction. These reports include a focus on context, infrastructure, and administrative capacities. Seoul National University's *Center for Government Competitiveness* is another key effort. In the spirit of these efforts, we not only identify diagnostic questions but also discuss possible methods and tools that might promote more flexible, holistic performance management regimes, related to the four questions identified above.

Q1: Linking Context and Capacity. To avoid performance pitfalls, we recommend strengthening the ways each organization (1) gathers information about its context and solicits resources from stakeholders (Mitchell et al. 1997) and (2) communicates its capacity back to its environment and key stakeholders. What contextual indicators are regularly used? Which contextual indicators may need to be updated more regularly to take the "temperature" of an organization's environment? What capacity indicators are used to assess resources internally, and to communicate those to the organization's context and stakeholders. Much has been written on the political context of public management (e.g., Kaufman 1956). Less has been written about linking public management, generally, to resource environments (but see Coupet and McWilliams 2017). But much has been written on specific efforts, like performance-based budgeting (Melkers and Willoughby 2001), which certainly inform the context-capacity link that we are recommending here.

Q2: Linking Organizational Capacity and Performance. Performance pitfalls can also be avoided by contextualizing performance in relation to organizational capacity. We recommend that organizations explicitly (1) measure their organizational capacities, including infrastructure, HR/managerial, and financial (see Christensen and Gazley 2008) and (2) connect, where possible, those capacities to performance goals and measures. Focusing on capacity as a precursor of performance offers some insight into what performance might be expected and how consistently, depending on an organization's capacity, an organization can achieve a particular performance goal. Linking capacity to performance is not an entirely novel suggestion as many scholars have outlined the ways management matters (Meier and O'Toole Jr. 2001), including empirical evidence of capacity's influence on performance (e.g., Hou and Moynihan, 2008). However, the literature on performance has far outpaced a commensurate focus on capacity and its bearing on performance. Greater attention on the link between the two will yield "more coherent performance management research" (Christensen and Gazley 2008, 277).

Q3: Linking Context and Organizational Performance. A final path toward avoiding performance pitfalls is to focus on contextualizing performance. We recommend that (1) organizations

adopt baseline measures of organizational performance that reflect their distinctive context (Wang and Christensen 2017) and (2) develop context-specific protocols to track performance trajectories over time using strategic planning (Poister 2010). Public organizations are frequently subjected to performance reform and management trends that often originate from outside of the particular context in which they operate (Ho and Im 2015). However, for performance management practices to move the dial on organizational performance, they must be integrated into the broader performance context the organization operates, much in the way research on strategic planning argues (George, Walker, and Monster 2019).

Q4: Managing the Dynamic Relationship between Context, Capacity, and Performance. A key argument in this article is that understanding performance of public sector organizations extends beyond a simple emphasis on quantitative performance metrics to capture distinctive features of the organization being evaluated (i.e., capacity) and the context the organization operates in. One step in this direction is to develop strategic planning practices that account for the dynamic environments public organizations operate in. Doing so, in a way that focuses on integrating context and capacity with performance, broadens managerial practices to account for the processes and procedures that govern the distinctive forms of value public organizations create. A second step in this direction is to consider the organizational ecosystem that performance management practices and reforms are implemented in. Rather than relying on canned performance metrics that are derived from best practices in other settings, greater attention to how such metrics can be adapted to reflect existing capacities and contextual considerations is needed.

Conclusion

This article has provided contemporary illustrations of the importance of avoiding a myopic focus on performance. Instead, this article proposes a competitiveness framework, which emphasizes organizational capacity and the ability to learn from and adapt to an environment. The more holistic view, offered by the competitiveness framework and illustrated by these recent pieces, requires connecting capacity to performance, including internal efforts to increase certain capabilities, and contextualizing performance more broadly in a process-based model that recursively links performance to capacity and context. The competitiveness framework offered not only integrates context, capacity, and performance but also motivates distinct directions for research and practice.

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