



Performance measurement in the public sector: United Arab Emirates' (UAE) state of the art

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There is an interest in the literature and among practitioners in the idea that public sector organizations should be managed for performance, but there is no clear agreement as to how this might be done. It is also unclear how the idea of *performance* can be measured. This article focuses on the critical question of what public sector managers know about performance measurement (PM), and how they perceive its potential for improving the performance of their organizations. The findings show that the overall public performance of the UAE local governments is excellent which is contributed by both financial and nonfinancial performance. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to review the performance management within the UAE public sector to assess the *state of the art*, and determine the present level of knowledge of PM among public managers. Finally, we suggest recommendations for managers and provide conclusions and research directions.

Keywords: management, measurement, performance, public organization, UAE

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Introduction

In recent years, managing and measuring performance has been one of the key drivers in the reform of public sector. It is one of the central grounds of the "reinventing government" movement (Gianakis 2002). Performance measurement (PM) is an important tool for increasing accountability, as it may provide data on how effectively and efficiently public sectors are managed. Much has been written in recent years about why governments should measure their performance regularly and why it ought to share it with the public. The focus was on identifying improvement areas in services that would meet people' expectations of getting best value for their money (Halachmi 2005). The literature identifies two perspectives with respect to the evaluation of the pros and cons of PM. One perspective consists of those who advocate for PM. Under the headline of results-oriented governments, some researchers advocate the power of PM and argue the benefits of PM for private sectors (Osborne & Gaebler 1992). The other perspective consists of those who regard PM with uncertainty (Gianakis 2002).

The role of PM has been one of the most widely studied topics in public management literature in the past decades (Broadbent & Guthrie 2008). It has received attention as public organizations try to implement new measurement systems to support their goals (Cavalluzzo & Ittner 2004). Therefore, managers are interested in designing, implementing, and updating PM in public organizations in both developed and developing countries (Ohemeng et al. 2018). However, few public organizations have developed PM, and even fewer use these systems to improve decisions (Julnes & Holzer 2001). Therefore, many researchers have focused on factors that influence PM application in public organizations. Several factors were found in previous literature such as organizational and technical factors (Sofyani et al. 2018), organizational culture (Henri 2006), and competition and organizational performance (Lee & Yang 2011), among others.

The role of PM in a developing country and emerging markets is relevant to explore, as governments in developing countries face various economic and institutional challenges (Farashahi & Hafsi 2009). They experience unstable business environment and face tough competition in addition to corruption, power shortages, and political instability (Hussain et al. 2012). Public sectors need to develop their capabilities to effectively tackle challenges while operating in global business environment (Singh 2018). There is a need for context specific studies in developing countries and emerging markets given the structural and cultural variations (Nakagawa & Sosaki 2021). Few counties have required government entities to implement PM in their operations and to mandate them to include performance indicators in their annual accounting reports. Therefore, we attempt to address this gap and examine the role of PM in a developing country such as the UAE.

The article is structured as follows: following the introduction, the literature review on PM in public sector is presented. Based on this background, the methodology and research design are presented before we report the results. A discussion of the results completes the presentation of the performance management in the UAE public sector: state of the art. Then recommendations and lessons learned from the current UAE public performance management are highlighted. The article closes with conclusion and further research.

Literature Review

Performance management and PM have often been used synonymously in the literature because they are closely related concepts (Goh 2012). But it is important to distinguish between the two processes. Performance management is viewed more broadly as a management tool that seeks to improve the performance of an organization. In contrast, PM focuses more narrowly on the metrics used to determine how an organization is performing. PM is, therefore, seen as an essential and important tool of performance management (Fantazy & Mukerji 2021). In this paper, the term PM is used when discussing these concepts. Although the practice of performance management is not new, it has been rejuvenated with the advent of new public management, which, amongst other things, advocated managerial freedom based on output control (Van De Walle & Van Dooren, 2008). In exchange for more autonomy and flexibility in the use of allocated resources and in choosing the means and methods, many public organizations had to accept more rigid performance management systems (Lægreid, Roness & Rubecksen 2008). Despite the importance of performance management, it has historically been rated by employees, managers, and the HR as one of the least effective and understood HR practices. In the early 1990s, the *state of the art* evolved in organizations developing performance indicators and targets. Since then, performance management has become increasingly systematic, specialized, professionalized, institutionalized and state of the art in the public sector (Van Dooren 2006).

The public sector is focused on PM as a tool to assess performance and demonstrate accountability through performance reporting of program activities. There is a wide range of application that has been reported in the literature, including its use in measuring performance in healthcare delivery such as wait times (Kelman & Friedman 2009), measuring the level of citizen satisfaction of services provided by

government agencies (Wichowsky & Moynihan 2008), the efficiency and effectiveness of programs such as education and other services at the municipal level such as policing (Sanger 2008). PM information is used for performance improvement, learning and change. The argument is that if PM information is not utilized as a tool for positive improvements in performance, it defeats the purpose of developing measures of performance (Thomas 2007). Although, it can be argued that the use of PM has many interpretations, in this article, we argue that managers and leaders in organizations should use the performance information to formulate strategies for future performance improvement and in decision-making. This is not simple as it involves many other supporting mechanisms such as rewards and positive incentives to encourage and recognize learning and improvement. However, it is essential to identify the key supporting aspects and conditions that will allow for performance improvement and obstacles to performance improvement.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study adopts descriptive research methodology. Descriptive research is conclusive in nature, as opposed to exploratory. This means that descriptive research gathers quantifiable information that can be used for statistical inference through data analysis. Therefore, this type of research takes the form of closed-ended questions, which focus on their ability to provide insights. The goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. This research is more concerned with what rather than how or why something has happened. Therefore, observation and survey tools are often used to gather data (Gall, Gall & Borg 2007). In such research, the data may be collected qualitatively, but it is often analyzed quantitatively, using frequencies, percentages, averages, or other statistical analyses to determine relationships. Qualitative research, however, is more holistic and often involves a rich collection of data from various sources to gain a deeper understanding of individual participants, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes (Nassaji 2015).

A structured questionnaire containing open and close response questions was administered face-to-face to random sample of middle and senior level public managers on some selected public sector organizations. Directors at the departmental level or equivalent position classifications were chosen. We approached 110 public sector organizations and received 87 complete responses. They were chosen from three Emirates, namely: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah. The three emirates were chosen because it was easy to contact them, and these are the three biggest emirates in the UAE. This survey took place during April-June 2019. The questionnaire was directly administered by a research assistant. A five-point Likert scale was utilized to measure respondents' views on the applicability of PM in public sector organizations. A pilot study was already carried out with a few managers to validate the items in presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 reports respondents' demographic details. The sample consists of 87 middle and senior level public managers. Female managers are (76%); between 30-49 years old are 52%; almost half of the middle and senior public managers have 5-10 years of experience and 86% of them have university degree. All respondents have a minimum income of AED 24,000.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

<i>Social-demographic profile</i>	<i>N=87</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Gender	Female (64)	73.6
	Male (23)	26.4
Age (years)	20-29	4.6
	30-39	52.9
	40-49	42.5
Qualification	Diploma	1.1
	Degree	86.2
	Postgraduate	12.6
Position	Director	16.1
	Deputy Director	80.5
	Supervisor	3.4
Experience (years)	<5	10.3
	5-10	48.3
	>10	41.4

Analyses and Results

To determine the present level of knowledge of PM among public managers, they were asked questions (Tables 2 and 3) to indicate the importance of PM to accomplish their objectives, using a five-point scale with endpoints *agree* (1) and *strongly agree* (5). Managers who scored 3 on average or more within a specific PMs were considered content with PM. The managers answered questions about the importance and the difficulty in the development and implementation of a PM system. The managers believe that determining long-term goals and objectives is important but difficult to implement. Further, participants believed that matching the objectives of programs with the general objectives of government was important but difficult to implement. Table 2 reports mean, standard deviation, and Chi-square statistics with associated p-value for each item.

Table 2. PM Among Public Managers

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Chi-Square (p)</i>
PM encourages behavior that is good for the organization	4.94 (.23)	68.14 (.00)
Designing and implementing PM systems shows that public organizations are serious about the rational allocation of public resources	4.97 (.18)	75.41 (.00)
Performance measures provide evidence to top management appraise the performance of the subdivisions of their ministries	4.95 (.21)	71.73 (.00)
Performance measure provides public managers with information that helps them improve the management of their units	4.18 (.39)	34.77 (.00)
Performance measures provide justification for corrective action by management	4.94 (.23)	68.14 (.00)
Performance measures enhance the awareness among the citizen about public sector performance	4.03 (.18)	75.41 (.00)

The managers agree that PM encourages good behavior for organizations (4.94, $p < .00$). Also, designing and implementing PM systems shows that government organizations are serious about the rational allocation of public resources (4.97, $p < .00$). Further, performance measures provides evidence to help top management appraise the performance of the subdivisions of their ministries (4.95, $p < .00$). In fact, the performance improvement is desirable, as it relies on implementation of sophisticated strategies rather than quick fixes of simplistic solutions (Holzer & Yang 2004). Moreover, UAE managers believe that performance measures enhance the awareness among the citizen about public sector performance (4.03, $p < .00$). However, managers partially agree that the performance measure provides public managers with information that helps them improve the management of their units (4.18, $p < .00$) and provide justification for corrective action by management (4.03, $p < .00$).

Table 3 reports items relating to the difficulty in implementing the performance measurement process along with their mean, standard deviation and Chi square statistics with associated p-value.

Table 3. The Important and Difficult of Performance Measurement Process

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Chi Square (p)</i>
PM is required by the government accounting process (How important)	4.24 (.43)	23.27 (.00)
PM is required by the government accounting process (How difficult to implement)	4.76 (.43)	23.27 (.00)
PM and control is considered part of the budgetary process (How important)	4.85 (.39)	111.17 (.00)
PM and control is considered part of the budgetary process (How difficult to implement)	4.76 (.57)	95.79 (.00)
Management and cost accounting is used to help government agencies develop a performance management process (How important)	3.94 (.35)	201.32 (.00)
Management and cost accounting is used to help government agencies develop a performance management process (How difficult to implement)	4.91 (.29)	57.94 (.00)

From a practical standpoint, we observe that managers perceive PM as a new strategy to be integrated into their public PM system (4.24, $p < .00$). PM should transform the business strategy and service design to deliver value (Ostrom et al. 2010). So the managers might have realized the importance of their public sector PM and acknowledged the fundamental requirements of public sector integration. The recent Federal Authority for Government Human Resources (FAHR) undertook the responsibility of preparing employee performance management system (FAHR Annual Report, 2020). The performance management is the outcome that the government seeks to achieve through driving its employees to comply with the current objectives and methods. However, the performance itself is not the main objective but rather the mean through which a goal can be achieved, which is the desired outcome. From this point of view, the performance is considered as the practical application of all the planning phases set by the federal entity. In light of this fact, and in accordance with the previously mentioned federal law, the UAE Federal Government employee performance management system is designed to accomplish the highest level of PM.

The public managers responded to some questions about the ways in which their organization have to account for their performance (4.76, $p < .00$). The annual report contains workload data and non-financial indicators. Efficiency is included in the current budget. In addition, PM is also helpful not only in the

budget process and efficient allocation of public sectors' resources to those activities which contribute most to the accomplishment of strategic objectives, but also in bringing early signal of the areas that need adjustments and improvements, thus allowing people to learn from their successes and failures (Baird 1998). Happiness and satisfaction is included in Customer Service Charter (CSC), though it is not used as an indicator of performance within the organization. However, there is timely response when complaints are made under the CSC. The number of complaints is a performance indicator in the organization. The participants who have stayed for less than five years in the same position mentioned that the CSC is used at a greater extent as an indicator of performance within the organization than the other participants do (not in Table).

Organizations consider training as a way of improving its performance management. Not only do these programs offer opportunities for staff to improve their skills, but also for employers to enhance employee productivity and improve public sector efficiency. Efficiency as a performance indicator is included in the current performance management. The UAE is the world leader in employee training and development programs that are essential to the success of public sector.

The UAE public sector employees, who get regular opportunities to learn, develop, and advance are more likely to stay at the leadership position. Learning and development are among the top factors in employee engagement, and employee development is the continuous effort to strengthen work performance through approaches such as coaching, training sessions, and leadership mentoring. Training is a specific event that teaches new information or skills, often provided to new or newly promoted employees. Both are key functions of corporate human resources staff, who typically are responsible for planning and implementing these efforts. A bachelor's degree in human resource management can prepare them to lead training and development programs at their organization.

Discussion

In the UAE, local government authorities are among the public sector organizations which play an important role in the delivery of government services. As they are assigned the responsibility to deliver key public services such as primary education, local health services and other typical local public services (ADCED 2018). Local authorities have come under pressure to modernize to improve overall performance and service delivery, cost reduction, competition, and increase accountability to their stakeholders (Koornneef, Robben & Blair 2017). As part of its wider public sector modernization and reform agenda in 2021, the UAE government introduced strategies such as performance management system to public sectors including local governments for planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation and reporting in the public services of UAE (FAHR Annual Report 2020). The system aimed to provide quality public services to the public, improve performance of public service institutions, improve accountability and responsiveness, ensure effective and efficient use of public resources, and provide standards for providing comparisons and benchmarking within the public service institutions in UAE as well as other public service institutions across the world for continuous improvement. This resulted in a statutory duty of continuous performance improvement. In the following section, we explain the state of the art that UAE government achieved by implement the performance management in human resources, and technology sectors.

With respect to the adoption of new public performance management, the UAE has been an early starter. Although, the current study included only three emirates; Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, all the seven emirates comprising the UAE federation also adopt the public performance management system (SCAD 2014). The government itself has been a major target of change and development in the UAE. As explained in Abu Dhabi's 2030 Vision (ADCED, 2018), the government of the UAE is committed to change and automation of its processes to achieve greater operational excellence. In 2014, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, launched an

ambitious set of plans with the overall goal of making the UAE one of the best countries in the world by 2021, the 50th anniversary of its foundation (Koornneef et al. 2017). The UAE National Agenda 2021 consists of a comprehensive set of key performance indicators (KPI) with specific targets and clear pathways for achieving those targets (Vision 2021). For example, in 2016, the UAE Government announced the appointment of a Minister of Happiness whose task it is to ensure that the UAE is ranked among the top five countries in the world according to the World Happiness Report. In fact, the government of UAE as a whole is committed to becoming one of the top five governments in the world in terms of the quality of public services provided (Bin Taher, Krotov & Silva 2015).

One of the new FAHR-funded PM projects undertook the responsibility in accordance with the federal law which requires that FAHR studies and proposes policies and legislations related to the UAE government human resources with the main objective of crafting an employee performance management system that would form a basic reference for all governments and federal entities, enabling them to efficiently manage the performance of their employees (www.fahr.gov.ae). Designing and implementing PM systems shows that public organizations are serious about the rational allocation of public resources. Performance management change requires allocation of adequate resources, especially human resources which is one of the key elements of a successful performance management project in the UAE (Davies 2011). Impacted functional units should be dedicated to assist the initiative sponsor with employees who can be made responsible for implementing the performance change in their respective units. Accordingly, assigned employees should be authorized to implement changes, use the allocated resources and request additional ones, if necessary (Carroll 2012). Assigning human resources to specific areas of performance change is necessary not only for actual implementation of these changes, but also for ensuring employee commitment to performance change. Employees, when assigned to implement performance changes, often take ownership of the new processes and advocate the same level of commitment among their peers

Due to the new PM, the UAE continues to grow rapidly in the technology space. Private and public sector players are seeking to modernize by adopting state-of-the-art solutions and catch the broader global wave of innovation, data utilization, digital transformation, technological advancement, and performance management (www.fahr.gov.ae). The UAE's desire diversifies and builds a knowledge economy in creating new opportunities. The government has set aside large parts of the budget in order to achieve the ambitious Vision 2021, Abu Dhabi Vision 2031, and UAE AI vision 2031 plans. Technology players and performance management continue to see the potential to grow their business in the UAE. Performance measures provide public managers with information that helps them improve the management of their units, and provide justification for corrective action by management.

The UAE's government performance management system includes managing the performance of national indicators of the UAE vision 2021, evaluation of government efforts to achieve the national priorities, managing the performance of government enablers indicators for customers and human resources, and those related to smart government and eGovernment strategies, and managing the corporate performance in terms of indicators of strategic objectives stated in the strategic plans of government entities. For this purpose, it created the UAE government performance management system which monitors the government performance for all federal government entities, and develops clear framework for performance to achieve UAE Vision 2021 and National Agenda. The UAE government pays attention to monitoring the sustainable development of performance and that the services provided by the entities can fulfil the peoples' needs.

The other public performance project that unveils the state of the art funded by The Ministry of Cabinet Affairs monitors the performance of government services. Another public performance project that signifies the state of the art is the healthcare system. The improvement of the health of its citizens and the performance of the healthcare system form one of seven headings of the UAE national strategy. The KPIs include population health targets, such as increasing life expectancy and reducing tobacco

consumption, as well as more structural and organizational targets, such as the regulatory requirement for all healthcare facilities to be externally accredited (Vision 2021). Overall, the UAE aims to be ranked amongst the top 20 countries in the world, according to the Legatum Prosperity Indicator. In 2019 the UAE was ranked 38th globally, an improvement from 40th place in 2018 (The Legatum Institute 2021). Given its starting point, it is remarkable what has been achieved in the UAE in the last four decades. However, since the early 2000s, the UAE has been involved in the government projects such as health system reforms, human resources, technology, and government organizations to further improve public performance services and address cost and quality challenges. These reforms have focused on the introduction of digital human resources, system legislation, partnerships, humanitarian and community initiatives and private health insurance and the growth of private health provision against a backdrop of rapid population growth in technology, and skilled labor.

Recommendations

We have observed that the public PM is not straightforward and can be challenging. However, we have recommendations based on this study. We recommend PM to conduct an overall assessment to identify the type of service the public organization provides. PM encourages behavior that is good for the organization. Designing and implementing PM systems shows that public organizations are serious about the rational allocation of public resources. Evaluating the performance management results, produced by induced changes in public sector, is critical to ensuring the attainment of goals and objectives of the new performance management system (Carroll 2012), though, the UAE public organizations often lack stability and maturity to make continuous evaluations an integral part of normal operations (Yaseen & Okour 2012). Public employees require training and skills development as well as establish objectives and targets for public organization performance that will be used to evaluate service quality levels. Hence, managers should participate in training programs and workshops to enhance their skills in preparation of plans and performance management practices. Training is the identification of skill gaps among workers. Skill gaps could be in managerial, social and behavioral, sales promotion, communication and technical fields, among others. Not only do these programs offer opportunities for staff to improve their skills, but also for employers to enhance productivity and improve public sector efficiency.

To develop an effective system that adds value to the government organizations, performance management must be aligned to support the overall objectives and integrate into other systems in the organization. The most effective performance management systems involve training in using the system, established clear accountability for the people using it and are focused on capabilities. Middle and senior management involvement is essential in government organizations. Also, employee involvement through developing the PM system is important. They contribute to the input, output, outcome, performance, process and every other aspect of the organization's operations. Management commitment is a crucial factor in introducing and managing public change in the UAE (Yaseen & Okour 2012).

Successful deployment of a PM system is related to developing a successful system of accountability. Managers and employees are accountable for the PM process, which must be based on their responsibilities and authority matrix. Another important recommendation which was not directly surveyed in our study but consistently mentioned in the literature is the role of leadership in the success of public performance. The literature grapples with questions about the nature of public leadership and what makes it different from the private sector. Leadership is widely seen as an important factor in the achievement of public policy goals.

The final issue in establishing a PM system is to ensure continuous data collection and documentation. Performance measures need to be integrated based on data collection from different government organizations. Continuous records of performance measures motivate employees and improve performance by focusing employee efforts on organizational strategic objectives.

Conclusion

Performance measure development is a lengthy and involved process that can take years to complete. The lesson for practitioners is that performance improvement requires more than simply the implementation of a PM system. For some organizations, PM may even hamper efficiency if the fundamentals are incorrect. In the UAE, the system is designed primarily to ensure policy compliance at local levels by assigning top-down, result-oriented targets to local officials and linking the officials' performance on target fulfillment to career advancement. The system created an incentive mechanism that motivated officials to develop various strategies. Future research may pay more attention to the complexity of PM and theories that can be applied to explain a limited scope of PM problems. In particular, more comparative studies of different systems, programs, institutions, policy areas, regions, and countries are necessary. More studies of the experiences and lessons in developing countries will help enhance understanding of performance management in a global context.

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