How to be a Better Benchmarking Visitor/Partner

An open mind, creativity, and the basics

R. Thomas Kirk, Jr.

It's no secret that benchmarking requires substantial preparation before you fly off to begin face-to-face meetings with your benchmarking partners. Establish a good foundation by selecting a benchmarking process. Experienced benchmarking companies have specific process steps that have evolved over time. Alcoa uses a six-step process, Florida Power & Light uses eight steps, AT&T uses nine steps, and Xerox uses ten.

Most of these and other successful benchmarking process steps are similar. Select a benchmarking process which suits your needs. Do not become entangled within the benchmarking process itself. Flexibility and common sense are the keys. Ron Brookbank, who instructs AME's "Practical Benchmarking" seminar, said during a recent presentation in Florida, "Benchmarking is not rocket science, but by following a process it will better prepare you to be successful."

Provide Training to All Areas

Once a process is selected, train the people (team members) who will conduct the benchmarking study. A minimum of two people (team leader and another team member) should receive training, although training for the entire team should be your goal. Too much time is otherwise spent discussing where the team is heading. Benchmarking orientation presentations also should be made to management, sponsors, and anyone else who will be affected by changes resulting from the benchmarking effort.

Do Your Homework

Thorough documentation and knowledge of your own company practices (policies and processes) in your selected benchmarking area is essential. Your overall operations process flows will provide an excellent description and discussion point with your benchmarking partners. Ron Brookbank suggests that you may want to videotape a particular process for a better understanding by your team. You need to ask intelligent questions of your benchmarking partners and to answer your partners' questions about your processes, as well.

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Prepare Your Question Set Early

Before you begin contacting benchmarking partners, prepare your initial question set. (You will undoubtedly revise it as you move through your benchmarking project.) This question set will be the basis for your face-to-face site visits with your benchmarking partners.

There are several reasons why your question set should be prepared *before* you call potential benchmarking partners. First, it will help you narrow the scope of your project, forcing you to focus on only important items. Second, it will help explain in detail what you are benchmarking. Third, it will help your initial benchmarking partner contacts to locate the appropriate department and individuals for your benchmarking effort. Some companies will not agree to become a benchmarking partner until they have reviewed your question set.

Before you contact any potential partners, you should test your question set on another organization within your own company, or customers or suppliers, to see if you will obtain the type of answers you seek. Early clarification of your questions will save you time and provide you with better information.

A very important item to consider is the size of your question set. Twenty-five to 30 questions is sufficient. You don't want to scare off your benchmarking partner, and you need to focus on the *important* questions. If your questions seem overwhelming, you could lose an excellent benchmarking partner. Some companies requesting visits have been turned down because of lengthy question sets. "Nice to know" information is unnecessary. Do not ask questions about information you can obtain from annual reports and library research; it wastes your partner's time and indicates your lack of proper preparation.

If possible, obtain answers to your question set from your partner before your on-site visit. You may discover that a partner cannot provide the type of innovations you are seeking. In this case, you can cancel your visit and offer to provide information to your partner on your operations, to help them improve.

If you have the answers to your question set before your visit, these answers will allow you to probe during the visit for more in-depth information in the areas with the most potential for improvement. It will also allow your benchmarking partner more time to ask about your operations.

Be sure to allow your partners adequate time to answer your question set. Two weeks (in their hands) is an absolute minimum; you should allow three to four weeks. You do not want to sacrifice good information for a quick turnaround response, whether you request answers to your question set before your on-site visit or not.

Prepare for Initial Contact With Your Benchmarking Partner

During this critical step, you need to sell your potential benchmarking partners on the value of partnering with you. You have to be well organized before you make the initial call. Figure 1 provides a checklist to use as an agenda for your initial contact.

Organize Your Site Visits

Take steps to shape the benchmarking visit for a successful exchange of information.

Initial Benchmarking Partner Phone Call Checklist

1. Introduction (name, position, company)
2. Reason for your call:
   a. Potential benchmarking partner
   b. Brief explanation of benchmarking, if necessary
   c. Information sharing will be one-on-one, if desired
   d. The value each partner can gain in the partnership
3. Reason you selected this partner (better-in-class or close proximity) — be honest!
4. Areas you are interested in benchmarking
5. You are interested more in practices (policies and processes) than hard data
6. Your proposed timeline for the project:
   a. Potential site visit dates, locations, and visit time lengths
   b. Attendees from your organization (who and how many)
   c. Request for question set completion prior to site visit
   d. Date by which partner will accept or reject your request for partnering
7. Who should receive the question set and confirmation letter for this request.

Figure 1. *Source: Ron Brookbank and Tom Kirk*

Best Practice Area: Management to Employee Communications (Customer Service Representative, Human Resources Management)

Company	Specific Best Practices
A	1. "Ask the Department Head" program — regular meetings 2. VP lunch with random employee once a month 3. Periodic employee surveys to identify hot issues
B	1. Supervisor to "employee group" counseling 2. Employee suggestion program 3. "Employee of the Month" selected by employees
C	1. Department head serves half-day as customer service representative once every three months 2. Supervisors conduct service observations for each employee once a month. Coaching with no "scoring" provided immediately.

Figure 2. *This format, as well as the format shown in Figure 3, may be used for sharing general data from other visits with benchmarking partners; be sure to "mask" the companies' identities. Source: Tom Kirk. All information in the example is fictitious.*

Select team members for the trip who will benefit the most — knowledgeable in the processes to be studied and potential implementers of the your findings. An optimum size group for an on-site visit is four or five people. Successful visits by larger groups must be well organized; they have the advantage of allowing a group to split into two or three teams at the site to interview a larger number of people, if time is limited.

Sticking to your agenda will be tough, but "winging it" through your visit will be tougher!

Provide a suggested agenda for your on-site visit to your host partner with scheduled times for certain topics and meetings with specific individuals you wish to interview. You will have to accommodate your partner's availability, but some structure is needed to ensure that you address necessary areas. Sticking to your agenda will be tough, but "winging it" through your visit will be tougher!

Be sure to schedule some time, near the end of the visit, for your host partner to take the lead in asking you questions which may not have come up in previous information exchanges. They will appreciate this courtesy.

If your visit is planned to last an entire day, request that it begin the first day after lunch, and end the following day by lunch. This schedule will provide a two-day span for your host to make available the employees you wish to interview. It will allow you to travel the first morning, caucus with your team that night to evaluate progress, and return home the last afternoon. If you are flying, caucusing again in the airport helps to summarize the trip, plan the next step, and make new assignments while this visit is fresh in your minds.

Organize your team for efficiency. Designate one person (an expert on a particular area) to ask specific questions and lead the discussion. Other team members can participate with follow-up questions. You can change the lead person as you move to different areas of discussion. Designate two, and preferably all team members, to take notes. Different people hear different information. Select someone (team leader or benchmarking facilitator) to keep the visit on schedule. Time can slip away in the enthusiasm of discovering new ideas.

Sharing as a Partner

During your site visit, keep in mind your "partnership" with your host. Confidential exchange of information with your host is essential. This two-way "sharing of secrets" allows you to "peel back that onion," as Ron Brookbank stated, to discover what is making a practice successful in your benchmarking partner's company. If sensitive or proprietary areas are approached in this process, do not be afraid to say "no" to requests for information. With this concern in mind, never ask a partner a question that you would not answer. Sharing *general* information with other partners may be acceptable, as long as the companies are "masked" (company names and locations deleted). Permission from each partner company must be obtained.

The "Benchmarking Code of Conduct" has been adopted by the Council on Benchmarking of the Strategic Planning Institute (617/491-9200) and the International Benchmarking Clearinghouse (713/685-4666), a service of the American Productivity and Quality Center. This code of conduct provides guidelines for the etiquette and ethics of working with benchmarking partners.

Document, Document, Document

Once you have begun your benchmarking visits, the challenge of assembling, updating, and organizing information can become a monumental task, if not properly planned. Many teams suddenly find themselves overwhelmed with information. One method is to establish best practice areas and begin listing specific best practices, by company, as you make your visits. Figure 2 shows a basic format that can be used and continually updated.

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Once you have completed your on-site visits, develop a format to summarize best practices, make comparisons, and develop recommendations. Figure 3 illustrates a matrix that can be used to capture summary information, including performance gaps and activities proposed for implementation. Across the top of the matrix, the "Best Practice Areas" are listed, followed by the "Most Outstanding Observation" you found in a particular company; something that really stood out!

Thorough Preparation and an Open Mind

Benchmarking, if done thoroughly, requires effort. Good preparation prior to your

Best Practice Selection Matrix

Customer Service Representative Human Resources Management

Better-in-class Company	Management to employee communications	Training	Special requirements for key positions	Most outstanding observation
A	VP lunch with random employee once per month	4 wks. classroom 6 wks. on the job	Knowledge test conducted every 6 months	Resource planning for shift flexibility
B	Employee of the month selected by employees	5 wks. classroom 6 wks. on the job	Front-line reps. make account write-off decisions	800 number for out-of-town customers
C	Supervisors conduct service observations once per month	4 wks. classroom 3 wks. on the job	Psychological profile	Four-day work week
Your Company	Quality Improvement Teams	5 wks. classroom 0 wks. on the job	Initial knowledge test only	Quality performance measurements
Gap Identified	Need for one-on-one upper management contact	Lack of on-the-job training and follow-up	Reaffirmation of knowledge. Employee Empowerment	N/A
Selected Best Practices	Company A Company C	Company C	Company A Company B	Company A
Recom-mendation For Imple-mentation	▪ Department head/employee one-on-one lunch ▪ Supervisors' service observations once per week	▪ Add 4 weeks on the job training and coaching.	▪ Knowledge test once per year. ▪ Write-off decisions up to $75 without supervisor's approval.	▪ Improve resources planning requirements to improve shift flexibility.

Figure 3. *This matrix can be used to capture summary information. Benchmarked companies are listed vertically, followed by the user's company. The user may find some best practices within his or her operations. The gap identified between the user's company and the partners and "selected best practices" (the best two or three from all the companies) will indicate areas for possible improvement activities. "Recommendations for implementation" are the practices proposed for implementation. Source: Tom Kirk; all information in the example is fictitious.*

on-site visits with benchmarking partners, will not only make you a better visitor/partner, but will also bring you better results. The up-front investment in preparation will pay off.

Above all, keep an *open mind* during your site visit. Do not be quick to criticize a different approach or begin to mentally list the reasons why this approach will not work in your company. The reason you are benchmarking is to obtain innovative ideas that have already proven successful in other companies. Concentrate on learning about the culture, technical skills, structures, systems, and environment that make these innovative practices successful. Understand what and *why* processes work well. Then be creative and develop ways to overcome the obstacles you will face in implementing changes within your organization.

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