

Performance measurement in a Chinese television organisation

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Abstract

This paper presents findings of a study into the use of performance measures in a large government controlled television organisation situated in China. Views on the current performance measurement system and suggestions for improvements were obtained from a survey of employees from one department in the organisation. The results show that at the team and individual employee level a number of tensions exist because of a gap between the present measurement system and the changing objectives of the organisation. The present performance measurement system emphasises and rewards program output. Increasing competition and commercialisation suggest there should be greater emphasis on measuring and improving program quality and involving employees in improvement activities.

Introduction

This paper presents findings of research into the use of performance measures in one department of a Chinese Government controlled television broadcasting organisation. To maintain anonymity the organisation is referred to as organisation XYZ. The research had two main objectives. First, to gain a better understanding of how performance measurement is currently used in a government controlled industry that is subject to powerful forces of change in its competitive environment. Second, to assess the effectiveness of the current performance measurement system and identify issues of concern. The view presented here is through the eyes of employees in one of organisation's departments involved in the creative activity of program production.

We present a brief review of the literature on performance measurement and also provide a review of the changes in the Chinese television industry. The changes that have taken place in the Chinese television industry in recent years have been dramatic, and have according to Weber (2002) changed it from a dying industry to a substantial contributor to economic wealth. The changes in this industry have resulted from nationwide political and economic reforms made by the Chinese Government and a number of specific reforms aimed at the Chinese television system. As these reforms are substantial and ongoing and affect the television industry at both a strategic and operational level we believe that it is important to provide a brief description of the industry background.

Literature Review

Performance Measurement

According to Marr and Schiuma (2003) business performance measurement is a topic of increasing interest both to business managers and academics. Marr and Schiuma's article was part of a special issue on this topic in *Management Decision*. They carried out citation analysis of the literature in the area of business performance management and their results showed a steady rise in the number of academic publications on the topic over the last three years as well as increasing commercial interest.

The area of performance measurement is complex and multi-faceted. Performance measures are used in organisations for a variety of purposes. For example, financial measures and aggregated operational measures are used for strategic purposes and to comply with legislative requirements (taxation, government statistical requirements etc). Operational measures are used for planning, to evaluate employee performance both at an individual employee and group level. Employee performance appraisals are often used as a basis for rewards. With the increasing emphasis of supply chains and networks evaluation of performance in relation to stakeholder groups, such as customer and suppliers, is becoming increasingly important.

A major challenge has been the design of a comprehensive performance measurement framework for an organisation – rather than a disconnected collection of measures. Rouse and Putterill (2003) present a good review of the literature in this area. Arguably, the best-known framework approach to the design of a performance measurement system is the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton 1992). This model is widely cited in the strategic management and accounting literatures but seemingly less so in the human resource management and operation management literatures. The review by Marr and Schiuma (2003) mentioned above found that the Balanced Scorecard was the most cited approach in the academic literature over the past three years. In this approach Kaplan and Norton advocate that key performance indicators need to be established to cover four key organisational perspectives – financial, customer, internal business and innovation and learning. More recently Kaplan and Norton have explained in greater detail how the balanced scorecard approach can be aligned with business strategy (Kaplan and Norton 1996). A search of a number of management journal data bases revealed no academic article on the use of the Balanced Scorecard in Chinese State Owned Enterprises. A relatively recent contribution to thought on performance measurement has been contributed by Neely and colleagues through an approach they call “the performance prism” (Neely, Adams and Crowe 2001, Neely 2000). Neely and colleagues have challenged a number of established views on how performance measures should be set up. For example, they argue that performance measures should be identified through an understanding of the needs and concerns of stakeholder groups rather than directly from business strategy. The importance of integrating a measurement system throughout all facets of an organisations activities is also embedded in the thinking behind the various organisational excellence frameworks (sometimes know as quality award frameworks) for example, the US Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award the European Quality Award and the Australian Business Excellence Framework (Evans and Lindsay 2002).

An important aspect of the use of performance measures is to understand how they influence employee behaviour at all levels – individual, group and department. The power of performance measures to influence behaviour was graphically illustrated in the classic article by Kerr (1995). Kerr explains that performance measures used as a basis for rewards, with the belief that these rewards will encourage desired behaviour, are often flawed and need to be carefully thought out. Performance appraisal, which can be defined as the process through which an organisation gets information on how well an employee is

doing his or her job (De Cieri and Kramar 2003), is often used as a basis for rewarding employees. It should be noted however that the human resource literature, a usual source of information on performance appraisal, has over the last few years become more strategically focused (Poole and Warner 1998). This has led to a more strategic treatment of performance measurement in some human resource management literature e.g. De Cieri and Kramar (2003).

The Chinese Television System

Background

There have been dramatic changes in the Chinese television system in recent years. Some of the changes have resulted from political and economic reforms at the national level, others stem from initiatives aimed specifically at the television system.

Warner (2003) describes some of the broad changes that have taken place in the Chinese economy. He points out that China has experienced two decades of growth since Deng Xiaoping launched the Open Door Policy in 1979. Reforms have led to greater mobility of labour and a continual decline in large and medium State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). The lifetime employment system known as 'the iron rice bowl', seen by Chinese economists as an impediment to economic growth, has been reformed. Warner also reports on key changes to human resource management in China. Managers have been allowed more autonomy and decision making has become more decentralised. The Western practice of labour contracts has been adopted nationwide since the mid 1980s and were soon supplemented by collective agreements. Warner points out that the introduction of labour contracts was particularly important in changing the nature of employment, which in SOEs used to carry a guarantee of lifetime employment under 'the iron rice bowl' system. The various economic reforms have had the most impact in populated areas of China and a new middle class has emerged in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Warner points out that with entry into the World Trade Organisation The State is anxious to carry out required labour reforms, particularly in the area of collective bargaining.

The Television System

The Chinese television system is of considerable importance both from an economic and cultural point of view. Zhao (1999) describes television broadcasting, which started in China in the mid 1950s, being regarded as the 'throat and tongue' of the Chinese Communist Party. It was tightly controlled by the Government and used extensively for disseminating propaganda.

Government control has continued but over the last few years has been significantly relaxed to enable the commercial development of the industry. As Li (2002, p.18) puts it: "In theory, Government policy still places Chinese television under direct political control... However, in practice, China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy has forced the television system to reform in fundamental ways". Tension between state control and market dynamics has become a defining feature of the Chinese Television System – 'mouthpiece or money-spinner?' (Zhao 1999).

Commercialisation of the Chinese television system has been achieved through a number of changes. There has been an enormous expansion in advertising revenue in recent years. Weber (2002) provides some statistics, for example, advertising spend in the television industry doubled to 185.6 billion RMB (approximately 30 billion \$Australian) between 1998 and 2000. Changes in television programming have

been an important factor in attracting advertising revenue and there has been a significant increase in light entertainment programs that attract large audiences and make advertising an attractive commercial proposition. Popular programs at peak viewing times – China's 'golden time' (7-9pm) - can provide television companies with significant returns (Weber 2002). Changes in labour policy have also been important in increasing the dynamism of the industry.

Weber (2002) outlines some Government directed reforms that have taken place in the industry. The system of 'one station, one province' has been replaced by a system of friendly competition. Labour reforms mentioned above have also started to be implemented. Li (2002) reports some of labour reforms implemented at CCTV one of the two national broadcasters operating from Beijing. Before the reforms staff were appointed to established posts, their jobs were safe and salary guaranteed. Now their income is primarily pegged to quantity and quality of their output. According to Li they have to work hard to achieve their program quotas. e.g. a CCTV reporter has to produce each month two new items at level A (broadcast at main evening news), two items at level B (the second main news slot), and two level C (outside prime time). Li suggests that the reforms have given rise to a new breed of journalist, some knowledgeable about modern media techniques and using styles and methods from the West and other countries outside China.

Both Li (2002) and Weber (2002) provide commentary on the structure of the contemporary Chinese television system. There are two national networks CCTV (mentioned above) and China Educational Television -China and more than 368 provincial and other local television stations around the country. Services are supplied by a complex network which includes national level satellite transmission, microwave and a large number of cable providers. Cable television has achieved good market penetration in some cities, Weber (2002) cites 60% penetration in Shanghai. According to Weber there are also five main foreign satellite broadcasters operating unofficially over China. However, regulations to stop illegal viewing of these programs have been rarely enforced with bars, clubs and in apartment blocks which cater for both Chinese and Western patrons. Competition between providers is intense. For example, CCTV which used to provide mainly news programs now also produces light entertainment programs and competes directly for audience share with provincial stations.

There are a number of challenges for the Chinese television industry. Government control is always problematic as stations probe the limits. For example, the popular CCTV program 'Focus' has broken new ground by running programs that investigate social and other problems in depth (Li 2002). In some cities programming is becoming choked with advertising (Weber 2002). The Government will also have to deal with increasing pressure from outside media moguls who are determined to gain a foothold in the huge Chinese market.

Li (2002) predicts that there will be more intense competition in the media industry after China's entry into the World Trade Organisation. Chinese television organisations will have to compete against both foreign and domestic counterparts. She suggests that Chinese journalists will also probably continue to try to push the limits, which in turn may result in more Government intervention in the industry.

Methodology

The organisation studied was a Chinese government controlled television organisation. As other researchers have found data collection in Chinese government run organisations is not always easy, especially when information that could be considered sensitive, such as data on performance measurement, is being sought (e.g. Bai and Bennington 2002). The first named author had worked in the

Chinese television system and her experience was important in making appropriate contacts and obtaining data. One of the 15 departments in organisation XYZ was selected for data collection. This department employed approximately forty-five people, the majority of whom were involved directly in program production. The main method of collecting data was a self-report questionnaire. The design for the questionnaire drew ideas from the literature on performance measurement and also on the experience that the first named author had obtained from working in the industry. It was considered important to encourage respondents to comment freely on the existing performance measurement system and to make suggestions for improvements. To achieve this a number of structured open-ended questions invited respondents to identify and comment on the use of up to three important performance measures of their own choosing. Respondents were asked to define each measure, to explain what the measure was used for, to explain how the measure might influence their performance, to comment on how useful they thought the measure was and to suggest changes to the measurement system. A more ambitious idea of asking respondents to comment on performance measures at different hierarchical levels in the organisation was abandoned after pilot testing; this approach was found to be too lengthy and difficult for respondents to complete. Besides the open-ended questions thirty-seven statements related to the use of performance measurement that required a response on a Likert-type agreement were included in the questionnaire. Basic demographics including job level, gender and age of respondents were collected. To enable data collection a Chinese language version of the questionnaire was designed and forwarded to employees in the target department by email. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese from the English version by the first named author who was fluent in Chinese and a web based version designed. The questionnaire could be emailed to employees in company XYZ completed on-line and emailed back to the researchers. Usable responses were received from thirty-six employees, representing eighty percent of those employed in the department surveyed. Descriptive statistics and graphics were used to evaluate the quantitative responses. Content analysis was used to analyse the open-ended responses.

Results

There were 36 respondents to the survey, 20 males and 16 females. Most respondents were relatively young (53% between 21 to 34 years). It was evident that the competitive environment in which XYZ was operating had change in recent years in two ways in particular. First, there had been a significant increase in competition. Only a few years ago XYZ had only one serious competitor and now there were around 50 competitive broadcasters with overseas competitors as well as local ones. Second, there was now significantly more reliance on commercial program activities to raise revenue. It was expected that that reliance on income from commercial activities would continue to rise.

Table 1 provides details of the performance measures most frequently cited by respondent and their main use. Table 2 summarises respondent's open-ended responses organised thematically. Table 3 presents the results of the responses to most of the standard items on the questionnaire. The items have been arranged in a number of logical groups.

Table 1 Four Most reported performance measures

Performance Measures	Main Use of Measure	No. Respondents Listing Measure (out of 36 total)
Quantity of programs produced	To monitor and measure respondent's work load. Basis for bonus pay	36
Meeting broadcast deadlines	To ensure on-time broadcasts and control respondent's performance	36
Quality of programs produced	To ensure program quality and control my performance	28
Audience rating	To improve my performance	8

Table 2 Summary of open-ended responses

Theme	Summary of comments
Influence of measures on performance	Comments related to how performance measurements influenced respondent's performance suggested a regime of reward and punishment. There was motivation to produce program output as this for some directly related to pay and the annual performance review. Program deadlines were expected to be met, if programs were delayed revenue could be lost. There was a basic requirement for program quality but this was often traded to meet program deadlines. Some respondents commented that audience rating had little or no influence on income and had more influence on program teams than on individuals.
Effectiveness of measures	Program quality was reported to be used mostly for control purposes rather than to reward. Some mentioned that audience rating was useful for benchmarking with other similar programs.
Changes respondents would like to see	Some suggested more use of audience ratings for peak time programs to measure their (team) performance. Suggestions were also made that more emphasis should be placed on measuring and rewarding program quality.
Some overall views	Existing performance measurement system is good at measuring workload and controlling performance but not good at encouraging improvements related to audience satisfaction. Employees are not motivated to improve their performance. More contact is needed with customers to understand better their requirements.

Table 3 Responses to selected questionnaire items

Item	Mean (see note ¹)	% who dis. & strongly disagree ²	% who agree or strongly agree ³
Strategically related issues:			
1. We take performance measurement seriously in our organisation	2.33	75	8
2. Government has a strong influence on formulating perf. measures	3.94	0	94
3. Department perf. measures support top mgt. objectives well	2.25	75	0
4. The department will flexibly change performance measures to suit market changes	2.44	69	14
5. Perf. measures are used more for control than for improvement	3.92	0	100
6. It is relatively easy to improve important performance measures in this organisation	1.94	97	0
Use of performance indicators:			
7. My income is strongly related to the money generated by the programs I produce.	2.61	53	14
8. My income is strongly relates to the audience ratings of programs I produce	1.44	100	0
9. My income is strongly related to the quantity of programs I produce	5.00	0	100
10. I am measured more on meeting broadcast deadlines than on program quality	4.03	0	100
11. Audience rating is frequently used	2.38	75	11
Effective use of performance measures:			
12. I am clear about how my work performance is measured	4.36	0	97
13. Perf. measures are used effectively for evaluating performance	2.14	91	6
14. Perf. measures are used effectively for improving performance	1.61	100	0
15. Audience rating has no influence on improvement	3.24	36	58
Respondent's beliefs:			
16. I should be measured on meeting customer needs	4.39	0	89
17. I should be measured on meeting program deadlines	2.72	58	34
18. I should be measured on the quantity of work produced	4.36	0	100
19. Program quality is more important than the quantity of programs produced	4.94	0	100
20. It is difficult to measure program quality	3.81	3	83
Employee support and customer contact:			
21. The department provides adequate support to improve employee performance	2.44	69	14
22. My manager shows an adequate level of interest in what I do and how I do it	2.33	72	6
23. I have regular contact with my customers and know and understand their needs	2.31	81	11

Notes: There were 36 responses for all items. ¹ Mean of five-point scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. ² Evaluations of 1 and 2 on five-point scale. ³ Evaluations of 4 and 5 on the five-point scale

Discussion of Results

Competitive Environment

It was evident that the competitive environment in which the organisation was competing was changing rapidly. There was significantly more competition between television organisations and more reliance by XYZ on revenue from program production for commercial clients. It is clear that the broad economic changes and the various reforms to the Chinese television system discussed in the literature review have begun to affect the operations of the company.

Use of Performance Measures

From Table 1 and Table 2 it is evident that that the quantity of programs produced and meeting broadcast deadlines are the two most influential measures reported. Program output is particularly important as this measure is used as a basis for bonus pay. Item 9, Table 2, shows that all respondent's incomes were strongly related to their ability to produce program output. Meeting program deadlines was reported as being a given for program producers. Audience rating was reported by surprisingly few respondents (See Table 1 and item 8, Table 3) and at present appears to be used more for encouraging program improvement than for financial rewards.

Comments related to how performance measures affected work performance suggested to at least some extent a regime of reward and punishment. There was general agreement among respondents that they should be measured on program output (item 18, Table 3) and this was the case in practice. However, respondents indicated a strong belief that program quality was important and thought they should be measured on this (see item 19, Table 3). However, it appears that the measurement of program quality is not well developed in organisation XYZ and is not used much to reward respondents' performance. In general the quality of an intangible service product such as a broadcast program can be more difficult to measure than a more tangible output such as program production and respondents certainly believe program quality is not easy to measure (see item 20, Table 3). To the extent that program quality is related to audience ratings and customer retention, better quality would lead to more viewers and to more advertising revenue. The literature review indicated that popular programs attracted advertising. Also, according to (Li 2002) program quality is becoming problematic with particular concern about the lack of high quality programs with cultural and historical values and in-depth analysis

It would seem that from the perspective of the respondents the approach used to performance measurement at the employee and employee group level is that of performance appraisal. Although the data does not provide a senior management view of performance measurement in company XYZ, respondents' views however do provide an insight into some issues of strategic importance including some aspects of senior management behaviour relative the performance measurement. Respondents indicated that Government had a strong influence on formulating performance measures (see item 2, Table 3). They also report that the performance measurement system could be more responsive to market changes (see item 4, Table 3). They also believe that performance measurement is not taken very seriously and that it is not easy to make changes. The items under 'employee support and customer contact' in Table 3 indicate that employee support could be improved. A number of observations can be made related to these results. Reforms of the industry reviewed indicate a policy of encouraging worker participation in decision making and change management in the industry. The results indicate that these changes have probably not progressed significantly in company XYZ. Clearly the market has become more competitive but the performance management system does not seem to respond adequately to these

changes. Respondents see the need to work more closely with customers in order to understand their needs better but seem frustrated that they are not able to do this.

Conclusions

Clearly, some of the initiatives aimed at changing the Chinese television system described in the literature are beginning to impact on organisation XYZ, at least in the department surveyed. In some ways the dual role that Government plays at industry level are reflected at the operational level of the survey respondents. On the one hand respondents are encouraged to be productive on the other hand there is evidence of a control culture rather than one of participation and planned continuous improvement. In the department surveyed it seems that performance appraisal is the predominant model. It seems unlikely that the organisation XYZ employs a performance framework approach, such as the Balanced Scorecard discussed in the literature review. There was scant evidence in the literature of the use of this approach in Chinese SOEs. Also, Hempel (2001) points to the lack of a body of research on performance appraisal in Chinese organisations. There was no report by respondents in this research of any processes in place to periodically review performance management systems within organisation XYZ. According to Kennerley and Neely (2000) literature clearly shows that it is important to be able to change a performance management system over time in response to changes in the competitive environment, workforce etc.

The research highlights some of the tensions in the present performance measurement system from the respondents' perspective. The results clearly indicate that respondents in the department surveyed believe that performance measures need to change but they seem doubtful that the mechanisms and perhaps the management support for such change exists in the organisation. An effective process to review performance measures seems to be absent in organisation XYZ. Research by Kennerley and Neely (2002) suggests that this may be a fairly commonly encountered barrier to the evolution of measurement systems in organisations. Other barriers identified by Kennerley and Neely (2000) in their UK research may also be present in organisation XYZ, in particular a lack of the necessary human resource skills. Although some of the issues raised in this research are similar to those outlined in the Chinese coal industry by Bai and Bennington (2002), especially the lack of alignment of current measures with changing markets, the nature of the television industry is significantly different. The television industry is a fast changing service, the product is relatively intangible and the need for operations employees to understand and react to changes in customer needs is arguably much greater than in a business supplying a commodity market such as coal.

Is there really a strong case for changing the performance management system in XYZ and other television companies who might be in a similar position? After all growth in the Chinese economy is exceptionally strong and the Chinese television is performing well, seeming moving smoothly and profitably from a basket case to a major contributor to economic growth and cultural change. On this basis one could argue that radical change in the performance management system is not needed, or at least that the need is not urgent. Also, it is evident that implementing a measurement framework approach like the Balanced Scorecard effectively is not easy. For example, Schneiderman (1999) points out that although many organisations purport to have implemented "the balanced scorecard" evidence shows that very few do this in an effective way. On the other-hand the nature of the Chinese television system is dynamic, and it is clear that creative and productive employees are an essential component of its success (Li 2002). From this latter perspective it is likely that Chinese television organisations like XYZ would benefit from reviewing their performance measurement systems. Current literature on performance

measurement suggests measurement frameworks, such as the Balanced Scorecard, are being increasingly recognised by industry as worthwhile investments (Marr and Schiuma 2003). Kennerley and Neely (2000) point out that there is clear evidence that performance measurement systems have an important role to play in the efficient and effective management of organisations. The development and use of key strategic measures is particularly important because their use can enable value creation in the organisation. Also, the opening up of the Chinese television industry to foreign competition, as described in the literature review, is another compelling reason why organisation XYZ and other organisations like it should develop their performance management systems. It is likely that multinational organisations will be using performance measurement systems to their operational and competitive advantage. However it is likely that the adoption of essentially “Western” performance measurement frameworks by Chinese organisations will probably require some modifications to fit aspect of Chinese business culture. For example, Hempel (2001) points out that the Chinese appear to have different ideas from the Western view about which employee attributes are important.

A number of limitations of the research need to be recognised. The data was obtained from one department of XYZ and the respondents’ views may not reflect the views of employees in other departments. Care has also to be exercised in generalising the results of a single case. However, the results are consistent in a number of ways with relevant published research and the paper makes a contribution by presenting data obtained directly from employees of a state-owned Chinese television organisation. It is clear that further research into the use of performance measurement in the Chinese television industry would be most worthwhile. The Chinese television system is of considerable importance both economically and culturally and there appears to be very little research undertaken using primary data.

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Proceedings of the ANZAM 2004 Operations Management Symposium



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The Symposium

The symposium was held at the University of Melbourne, Australia on the 17th and 18th of June 2004. Dr Damien Power convened the symposium with the support of Professor Danny Samson and colleagues from the Department of Management at the University of Melbourne.

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Conference Theme - Operations Management: Global Challenges and Local Applications

The pressures of global competition, technological, social and political change, and expanding markets have created significant challenges for the management of operations in all sectors. Managers are confronted with the need to be both locally responsive and globally competitive. As such, the effective management of operations becomes a strategic imperative and potential source of competitive advantage. The recognition of this fact has led many organisations to look not only at operations as an internal function, but as a set of interacting and interrelated processes. This view has also led to a focus on processes not just within the firm, but between firms. In this context this symposium aims to act as a focus for operations management research by providing a venue to present current research, as well as providing a meeting place to explore collaborative research opportunities.

Refereeing Process

Papers included in these proceedings were subjected to a double-blind refereeing process. Full versions of papers were submitted for the refereeing process. Each paper, after first having the identity of its author(s) removed, was forwarded to two appropriate reviewers for evaluation. The organising committee wish to express their sincere thanks to the many academics who reviewed papers for this symposium.

Model Citation

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Proceedings of the ANZAM 2004 OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT SYMPOSIUM

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