



## Benchmarking in the ELT Sector

Simon Thompson (pictured) and Steve Wheatley outline an internal benchmarking project carried out by Linguarama.

This article describes the performance and results of an internal benchmarking project undertaken by Linguarama and BPP International in the first half of 2000. The project was undertaken to support a proposed merger between the two organizations, in an attempt to ensure a high quality of service provision.

### Introduction

"Benchmarking" may be described as *the process of seeking out and studying the best practices that produce superior performance.*" (Best Practices LLC website) The process of "seeking and studying" should not be an end in itself, though. Once identified, best practices must then be implemented and constantly reviewed in order to ensure a high and continually evolving quality of service. As one leading consultancy specializing in benchmarking points out:

*"The benefits of process benchmarking are realized only when clients employ recommendations and embark on a change process making marked improvements in the productivity, costs and revenue of the company."* (Best Practices LLC website)

In the ELT sector, results may include areas such as:

- Ways of accurately measuring and

improving billed teacher utilization (productivity improvement)

- Brochure standardization/joint buying of brochures (cost improvement)
- Pricing of courses (revenue improvement)

A fourth area – quality improvements – for example, through better course design, or more thorough teacher observation programmes may also be identified. The measurement and assessment of quality (by definition qualitative rather than quantitative!) is a subject that management theorists and ELT providers may debate at great length – see Pickering (1999).

***Internal benchmarking aims to identify best practices within one organization, while external benchmarking measures the performance of one organization against other, industry-leading companies***

Two forms of benchmarking may be identified – *internal* and *external*. Internal benchmarking aims to

identify best practices within one organization, while external benchmarking measures the performance of one organization against other, industry-leading companies.

While benchmarking may seem somewhat distant from the actual business of teaching, as a concept it is not so far removed from the staffroom, or from the classroom. Think of teachers comparing different hours, hourly rates, travel time etc. between different schools or comparing the progress of classes at similar levels following different syllabi. Similar examples of such "informal benchmarking" can be found all around us in everyday life, and the English teaching business is no exception.

In answer to the question, "Why Benchmark?" a consultancy specializing in educational benchmarking in the United States provides a succinct answer:

*"Benchmarking is one of the most powerful tools for initiating and sustaining continuous improvement."* (Educational Benchmarking Institute website)

There is a welcome and increasing interest in the ELT sector in the idea of Continuous Professional Development. The idea of language training

*If a language provider fails to understand its Critical Success Factors, or conducts its business without paying sufficient attention to them, there is a high risk of business failure*

Companies themselves continuing to improve is of equal importance.

## Aims of the BPP/ Linguarama Project

During the first six months of this year, in response to a proposed reorganization of the BPP Group's language training operations in Central and Eastern Europe (operating under the "Linguarama" brand name), it was decided to undertake a Benchmarking project. It was hoped that by doing so:

1. We would deepen our understanding of our business.
2. All centres would be able to raise the quality and long-term profitability of their operations.
3. Business and pedagogical processes would operate uniformly across centres.
4. The unnecessary duplication of processes and systems development ("re-inventing the wheel") could be avoided in existing and newly established centres.

The Benchmarking team identified the following aims:

1. To identify a number of **Critical Success Factors**, together with the underlying objectives and processes supporting them that should apply to centres in Central and Eastern Europe.
2. To assess and compare the systems and processes in place at all Central and Eastern European centres with at least one more "mature" centre with a similar business profile in Western Europe.
3. To identify best practices to be adopted in all centres in the future.
4. To ensure that these best practices are agreed, implemented and adhered to.

5. To monitor and update these best practices in the light of future developments.

To date, only 1 to 4 above have been completed. Monitoring and updating of best practice procedures has not yet taken place on a formal basis, as envisaged at the beginning of the project. Most of the best practices have identified have been implemented, though, and informal observation suggests that they are indeed being updated on a local basis. Monitoring and updating will begin in early 2001.

## Critical Success Factors

The first step in the benchmarking process is to identify a number of (not too many) Critical Success Factors.

**These are the main elements of a business that determine its success.** If a language provider fails to understand these Critical Success Factors, or conducts its business without paying sufficient attention to them, there is a high risk of business failure.

**It is not enough, though, to understand the Critical Success Factors alone. They must each be supported by one or more objectives.** For example, a restaurant's Critical Success Factors may include having a clean, hygienic environment. Supporting objectives will include compliance with health and safety regulations and ensuring that customer toilet facilities are always clean. A university language centre may decide that its Critical Success Factors include recruiting the highest quality teaching staff. Supporting objectives would include recruiting at Diploma or MA level only.

These objectives are in turn

**supported by processes, or activities.** To return to the examples above, processes for ensuring compliance with health and safety regulations in the restaurant would include ensuring that staff are aware of their responsibilities in this regard (through training, staff notices etc), that appliances are regularly cleaned and maintained, and so on. An inspection every 30 minutes is an example of a process that attains the objective of keeping the customer toilets clean. The university language centre seeking to recruit Diploma or MA level staff might mail all Diploma or MA "passes", regularly take stands at events (such as IATEFL) where there are a large number of suitably qualified teachers, and ensure that its website accurately reflects its recruitment policy as examples of supporting processes.

## Six Critical Success Factors

The following six Critical Success Factors were identified for BPP/Linguarama, a private sector business language training company. These were identified and agreed in a series of meetings between senior management and the benchmarking "team". As befits a service provider, they are largely client-driven. They are inter-dependent and it is therefore not sufficient to achieve one Critical Success Factor at the expense of others.

### 1 Training

The quality of training delivered to our clients and the quality of our training materials should be of a consistently high standard.

### 2 Winning and Retaining Clients

We should be recognized as the leading language training provider in our market(s).

# benchmarking

## 3 Client Service Support

We should support the delivery of our services professionally and efficiently.

## 4 Profitability

Our pricing policy and cost control procedures should allow us to achieve and maintain long-term profitability.

## 5 Staff Development and Retention

We should recruit, develop and retain staff of the highest quality.

## 6 Flow of Information

The flow of information within our organization and between us and other parties should be efficient and effective.

For each Critical Success Factor, the benchmarking team then identified a number of objectives for each. The objectives were agreed in advance with local commercial and pedagogical managers in each centre to be benchmarked. As an example of how this worked in practice, the fifth Critical Success Factor – Staff Development and Retention – is included below:

### Critical Success Factor 5 – Staff Development and Retention

We should recruit, develop and retain staff of the highest quality.

#### Objectives:

- Our recruitment policy should allow us to recruit enough staff to deliver our full range of products and services.
- We should recruit staff of a consistently high standard.
- Procedures should be in place to identify strong and weak performance.
- Appropriate action should be taken when necessary to rectify or eliminate poor performance.
- Processes should exist for the identification of training needs and the delivery of appropriate training, either through internal or

external training providers.

- Systems for staff appraisal and career development should be consistent and effective across centres.
- Opportunities for development and promotion should be available to all staff within the company on the basis of merit.
- When key staff leave the organization, the reasons should be clearly understood.
- Remuneration policies should allow us to retain high quality staff.
- All staff should have written contracts of employment, including a full job description.

## Process Questionnaire

From the objectives relating to each Critical Success Factor, a lengthy (more than 200 questions) questionnaire was devised by the benchmarking team, and sent to each centre well in advance of a benchmarking "visit". The questionnaire was designed to identify the business processes currently in place (if any) which supported the agreed objectives. **Centre Champions** (usually the Centre Manager and/or Director of Studies) were asked to investigate these in detail through a series of meetings with all members of staff, and to collect documentary evidence of processes and procedures already in place.

Completing the questionnaire thoroughly took each centre a great deal of time, but the process of completing the questionnaire itself helped all staff to identify and understand the business processes already in place in each centre – a significant achievement in itself.

Questions asked relevant to Critical Success Factor 5 (above) included:

1. Do you have an organization structure that includes all staff members? If so, are all staff aware of this structure?
2. Do all staff have written job

descriptions?

3. Do you have written job profiles?
4. Do you have detailed personnel records? If so, how are these managed and how do you ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information?
5. Do you have a clear salary structure and grading system for staff?
6. How do you assess your staffing needs?
7. What methods do you use to recruit new staff?
8. Who is involved in the recruitment of new staff?
9. What are your systems for staff appraisal and career development? How do you ensure that these systems are consistent with other centres?
10. Do staff have career plans and, if so, how are these formulated?
11. How are the training needs of staff identified?
12. What information and assistance is provided to staff interested in developmental training?
13. How can we give staff fulfilling career opportunities within the group?
14. How can we provide attractive, long-term remuneration packages and communicate the advantages to our staff?
15. How can we keep good teachers in the classroom and reward them adequately?
16. How do you deal with situations where members of staff do not meet the required standard of performance?
17. How do you deal with problems of staff discipline?
18. What is the procedure for dealing with staff grievances?
19. How do you encourage and respond to staff suggestions?
20. Do you conduct exit interviews with staff leaving the organisation? If so, who does this and how is it done?
21. Do your staff have written contracts? If so, is there a template for each type of contract?
22. What is the legal status of your staff?

## Site Visits

After giving each centre sufficient time to complete the questionnaire in detail, the benchmarking team visited for at least one full day to explore in detail some of the processes currently in place in each centre. Meetings were held with commercial and pedagogical management, the teaching team, and the administrative support team. All staff were given the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas as to what constituted "best practice"; how current systems and processes were working (or not working), and what (if any) new systems and processes were needed to achieve the objectives outlined above.

After visiting all centres, including a "Western European" centre not part of the proposed merger for purposes of comparison, the benchmarking team had the difficult task of deciding what should represent "best practice" across the group.

Of course, deciding what represents "best practice" is a subjective decision. There may be (and in fact there certainly is) more than one way of equipping staff, for instance. In addition, there may be cultural factors to take into account, meaning that what is best practice in one country will not necessarily be the case in another. Differing labour laws, for example, may affect the hiring of franchise staff in one country but not in a neighbouring country.

## Recommendations

Best practice recommendations were then collated into report form, and supported with examples of standard forms (e.g. for teacher observation), contracts, templates or samples (e.g. brochures, other marketing materials). A total of 40 recommendations were produced, ranging from:

1. Observation of teaching staff, to
40. Dealing with Customer Complaints

Each recommendation was divided into a Summary of the recommendation, Specifics (exactly what should be

done).

**Reasons for Improvements** (why we felt it was necessary and how it would help us achieve one or more of the Critical Success Factors), and **Implementation Details** (a timetable for how, by whom, and by when the recommendation should be in place). A sample recommendation is reproduced below:

### Benchmarking Point 1 – Observation

#### Recommendation

Every language tutor, including tutors of Other Languages (i.e. not English), should have their teaching reviewed at regular intervals by a senior member of the teaching staff.

#### Specifics of Recommendation

All new tutors should be observed in the classroom during the first three months of service. All tutors should be observed a minimum of 2 times per year, using the existing observation sheets for preparation, observation and feedback (see copies attached).

A quarterly summary of observations conducted in each centre should be forwarded to the Regional Training Manager within a week of the end of each quarter.

Specific arrangements should be made to delegate clear responsibility for the observation of other language tutors.

Observations should be conducted by trained staff, and should be at pre-arranged times agreed with the tutor. Following the feedback interview, a copy of the observation feedback sheet should be given to the tutor concerned and a copy forwarded to the Director of Studies for information.

The Director of Studies should ensure

***All staff were given the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas as to what constituted "best practice"***

that a copy of the feedback sheet is subsequently passed to the Centre Manager for storage in the individual tutor's personnel record.

A separate file of observation feedback sheets should be kept by the Director of Studies, the forms being stored in chronological order and divided by quarter (eg 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2000).

### Reasons for Changes/Improvements

The recommendation should ensure tight quality control, particularly with regard to the induction of new teachers and the monitoring of other language training.

Systematic storage of the feedback sheets and review of the programmes should enable a more detailed picture of individual development to be established from central records, assisting with training and development planning.

Previously, observation programmes were monitored by Linguarama's Group Pedagogical Unit in the UK, with no review or analysis at the regional level.

### Implementation Details

By 26<sup>th</sup> May 2000, Centre Managers should ensure that responsibility for observing other language teachers has been clearly delegated and that regular and comprehensive observation programmes are in place, co-ordinated by the Director of Studies.

By 26<sup>th</sup> May 2000, the Regional Training Manager to design and distribute a BPP International quarterly Observation Report form, together with instructions for completion.

By 7<sup>th</sup> July 2000, quarterly Observation Reports to be submitted to the Regional Training Manager for the period April to June 2000.

### Implementation

Each centre received the full Benchmarking report with its 40 Recommendations and all backing documentation collected during the project.

Some recommendations required very little in the way of lengthy implementation (e.g. new stock control

# benchmarking

procedure). Others required several weeks or months to collect information, etc. (e.g. competitor survey). In each case, centres were given a date by which each stage of the implementation process should have been completed, and local managers and Directors of Studies were contacted to ensure that implementation had, in fact, taken place or were asked to explain why it hadn't. Although this may have seemed quite draconian to participants at the time it did help to prevent "slippage", and therefore ensure that implementation of the recommendations did take place.

## Conclusion - Benchmarking as a First Step

The benchmarking project certainly helped its participants to understand how their business operated more deeply and to identify the drivers behind quality and profitability. Best practices were identified and implemented that have improved the quality of service delivery. To date, though, this has been a one-step

change, rather than a process of *continual improvement* as noted above in the introduction.

It is important that a process of review and continual improvement is established. There is a need for regular reviews of centres to continue to identify best practice, ensure that any agreed changes have been implemented, and to allow new and improved systems and processes to be developed and shared. This is when the real benefits of continual improvement will be felt by staff and students alike, as well as by the bank manager!

## References

Best Practices LLC website:  
[www.best-in-class.com/site\\_tools/faq.htm](http://www.best-in-class.com/site_tools/faq.htm) accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2000.  
Pickering, G (1999) "Roads to Quality Street" ELT Management 28 Educational Benchmarking Institute" website [http://www.webebi.com/WhyBenchmark/body\\_whybenchmark.htm](http://www.webebi.com/WhyBenchmark/body_whybenchmark.htm) accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2000.

*Simon Thompson is currently Regional Manger for Linguarama Central Europe, based in Warsaw, Poland where he has worked for 5 years. In October this year he is taking a year off to study for an MBA at the University of Edinburgh, after which he hopes to pursue his interest in e-learning.*

*Steve Wheatley is currently working as a freelance language trainer and course designer for a number of large international clients, primarily in the finance and consultancy fields. He previously worked for Linguarama International in Spain and, later, Central Europe in various capacities, including teacher, Director of Studies and Regional Training Manager for Central Europe. They can be contacted at:*

[simonthompson@linguarama.com](mailto:simonthompson@linguarama.com)

[swheatley@yahoo.com](mailto:swheatley@yahoo.com)

## **ELT Management Pre-Conference Event**

Tuesday, 17 April, 2001  
IATEFL Conference, Brighton

### **Managing People**

The SIG will be running a participatory workshop at the IATEFL Conference on the theme of Managing People.

#### **Topics include:**

- motivation
- coaching staff
- dealing with difficult people and situations
- stress management

#### **Presenters**

Eryl Griffiths, Francis Hallam and George Pickering

#### **Price**

IATEFL members: £45. Non-IATEFL members: £55

For further details please contact: [iatefl@compuserve.com](mailto:iatefl@compuserve.com)