



Dear Workforce: How Much Support Staff Should We Employ?

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Just as there are three R's for school, so too for staffing: reliability, relevancy and results.

Answered by Courtney Mohr, BPI group

Q Dear Workforce:

How do I use benchmarks to determine if my support departments are staffed properly?

—*Musing in Management, Government, Maryland*

A Dear Musing:

Remember grade school and the three R's? We recommend that you apply another set of R's—reliability, relevancy and results—to assess whether your support departments are staffed appropriately. Like the R's, these form the foundation for working with benchmarks in almost any organizational setting.

Reliability: Make sure your sources are first-rate

With the proliferation of information via electronic media, it is easy to find benchmarking studies. Some are reliable, while others are ... well, much less so. Be sure any data you use is from a trusted source and:

- Includes multiple organizations so that you can slice the data by company size, industry and geography to get the most relevant comparisons.
- Is recent. As business conditions change, so do organizations. Be especially certain you are looking at information reflective of the current economic cycle.
- Read the fine print. In today's world, sizing of a department is dramatically affected by outsourcing and process automation. Most robust surveys will provide details of what is included in a given benchmark so you can determine if it compares to your situation.

Additionally, always use several reliable sources in order to look at a range of statistics. Never rely on one source of information.

Relevancy: Evaluate how applicable the data are to your organization

The second R involves understanding context—how relevant are the benchmarks for your particular organization?

Although benchmarks can be useful diagnostic tools to uncover problem areas, they should never be used as prescriptive tools to “get to the right answer.” What is right for other companies may not be right for yours. For instance, are you in growth mode? Changing your go-to-market strategy? In the midst of a transformation? Is your competitive advantage directly linked to your people or a unique staffing model? Benchmarks will not reflect the needs of your unique situation. Keep your business context in mind as you compare yourself with others.

Results: Stay focused on what you need to accomplish

External benchmarks that are reliable and relevant show how you stack up, but be sure to also establish internal benchmarks that measure what matters most in your business. In other words, rather than focusing on the number of people in a given department, focus on their results. Probe internal data such as:

- By what percentage have customer complaints been reduced year after year?
- Are productivity levels increasing?
- Is the quality of candidates increasing while the time to fill open positions is decreasing?
- Are your processing times better than last year?

Following these three R's will undoubtedly put you well ahead of others when it comes to using benchmarks in a meaningful way.

SOURCE: Courtney Mohr, managing director, [BPI group](#), 2010