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### Published in:

-

### Publication status and date:

Published: 01/01/2005

### Document Version

Early version, also known as preprint

### Citation for the published version (APA):

Bouckaert, G., Laegreid, P., & Walle, S. (2005). Trust quality measurement models, and value chain monitoring: symposium introduction. In - (Vol. 28/4, pp. 460-464) <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/50009>

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Bouckaert, G., Laegreid, P. & Van de Walle, S. (2005). Trust, quality measurement models, and value chain monitoring: symposium introduction, In: *Public Performance and Management Review*, 28(4): 460-4

## Trust, Quality Measurement Models, and Value Chain Monitoring

Geert Bouckaert, Per Lægreid & Steven Van de Walle

In recent years, trust has become one of the most fashionable topics in the social sciences, and public administration is no exception. As is quite often the case for popular topics, the word “trust” is no longer only used in its original meaning as “a bet on the future contingent actions of others” (Sztompka, 1999), but is used in a broad range of meanings and contexts. In public administration research, two major streams of research can be distinguished. One focuses on the extra-organizational dimension and emphasizes attitudes of actors outside the administration toward this administration. Typically, this research studies citizen attitudes toward the public administration and government. The second stream of research focuses on the internal dimension of public and private organizations. The tension between trust and contracts in steering relations is a central topic here (Kramer & Tyler, 1996), as is the broad range of relationships between administrators, managers, frontline staff, politicians, contractors etc.

Intra- and extra-organizational dimensions cannot be distinguished easily, as this depends on the focus and the scope of the research. Both dimensions, however, are interrelated, and therefore, important for governments to monitor. Tensions between

management and front-line staff may reflect on how customers perceive the organization to function, or citizens' dissatisfaction with public services may stimulate politicians to reconsider their approach to steering the administrations they are responsible for.

Governments that recognize and value this complex interrelatedness require instruments to integrate and monitor all of their quality efforts into one single quality framework. The most comprehensive of these strategies is found in the Canadian public sector, where a "service-value chain" relates employee satisfaction and commitment, client service satisfaction and citizen trust and confidence in public institutions (Heintzman & Marson, 2003). It is ultimately based on the concept of a service profit chain in the private sector. This service profit chain allows businesses to develop strategies to improve their quality and productivity, and serves as a handy vehicle for communicating complex strategic plans to all levels and members of the organization. Despite the practical attractiveness of this chain and the contribution it has made to customer service, the model hides a complex set of relationships (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997). Since 2001, the Study Group on Productivity and Quality of the European Group of Public Administration ([www.kuleuven.ac.be/egpa](http://www.kuleuven.ac.be/egpa)) has organized a number of meetings on the issue of trust, quality measurement models and value chain monitoring. During these meetings, efforts were made to map citizens' actual perception of the public administration, and to study the theoretical and causal relations between the performance of public services and overall trust in government. A first series of results has been published in an issue of the *International Journal of Public Administration* in 2003 edited by dr. Eran Vigoda. The four articles in the present symposium each focus on

a different element of the interrelatedness of the performance of the public administration and intra- and extra-organizational trust.

Policymakers' and intellectuals' concerns for rising citizen discontent with government dominated most of the 1990s, and continue to do so. Distrust is said to follow from government's failure to deliver what citizens expect. (Dis)trust is the result of a confrontation between citizens' expectations and government's actual performance (Pharr & Putnam, 2000, p. 21). Government's failure to perform may "erode confidence in government institutions" (Miller & Listhaug, 1999, p. 206). These concerns have often been identified as an important motivating factor for initiating public sector reform: "the global reform movement is a symptom of --and a reaction to-- the decline of public confidence in governmental institutions and performance" (Kettl, 2000, p. 57). Yet, a relationship between the scope of public sector reforms and the extent of citizens' distrust in government in a country does not seem to exist (Suleiman, 2003). Levels of (dis)trust cannot be satisfactorily explained by correlations with management reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, p. 131). Additionally, most of the international opinion data do not reveal an unambiguous downward trend in trust. Still, presumed citizen discontent and the impact of the public sector's functioning on citizens' trust take a central place in much of the governmental discourse legitimating public sector reform.

Low levels and even decline of citizens' trust in government and of satisfaction with public services are generally taken for granted in the public sector reform discourse. The need for actually restoring trust, however, has been challenged from two different angles. Empirically, opinion data do not reveal clear downward trends in levels of trust.

Positive evolutions are found just as often as negative ones; that is, if any trends are found at all. Many users are actually quite satisfied with public services, especially when compared to satisfaction scores for political institutions. Additionally, time-series and comparative data are not available in many countries.

A second challenge is a more philosophical one: it is difficult to determine how much trust a government needs. A government needs to be trusted to be able to execute its tasks (Clark & Lee, 2001). Distrusting citizens may be less inclined to pay their taxes, obey the law, or to comply in general (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Levi, 1996). On the other hand, high levels of trust are thought to be potentially harmful to democracy, a system that, after all, institutionalizes distrust by providing for an extensive system of checks and balances. The optimal level of trust is defined differently depending on how one perceives the role of government in society (Parry, 1976).

Relying on just one single survey, it is difficult to determine when trust is too low, or when citizens' satisfaction with a public service becomes problematic for the survival of this service. Whether a government's first mission is to satisfy *citizens as customers* is a matter of dispute. In current political discourse, citizens' image of the public sector is defined as being negative, and thus, problematic. Worries about levels of trust and satisfaction may just as well be stimulated by empirical observations (e.g. strong downward trends), as by changes in the overall political agenda. Causally relating the performance of public services to this perceived negative image, however, may be an oversimplification of reality, and this for two reasons. First, administrative performance and trust in government may be related in many different ways, and second,

government's and the public administration's unique position in the creation of satisfaction and trust is probably overrated.

Government performance and citizens' satisfaction with services and trust in government may be related in many different ways. Performance may lead to trust, may do so only with a time lag (Kettl, 2000, pp. 56-57), or may be mediated by perceptions of performance. Low trust may stimulate citizens to perceive all performance negatively, just as high trust may encourage citizens to evaluate services positively, regardless of their actual performance. High levels of trust in government also reduce pressure on an organization to perform.

The public administration's unique position in determining citizens' attitudes toward the public sector and toward government is probably overrated. Government is not the only source of attitudes of trust in government, just as public services are not the only determining factor of satisfaction with public services. Opinions about the public administration and about government are often embedded in a generalized attitude toward government. Trust in one institution often coincides with trust in most institutions. Citizens have an opinion on services they have never used, or that may not even exist. Evolutions in trust in government have been found to correlate with evolutions in trust in other institutions. Personal states of mind may influence the way that services are being evaluated. On the other hand, citizens do not have a homogeneous set of opinions toward government. Some services are trusted, while others are not. A single opinion about "government" or "the public administration" may not even exist.

This constant tension between specification and generalization leads us to different paths for studying attitudes toward the public administration. Trust in the public administration and satisfaction with public services does not follow directly from the quality of a service. Research has moved beyond the limits of the public administration itself and has increasingly analyzed the socio-cultural context in which the public administration exists, hence the attention to societal and political factors in explaining attitudes toward public services in Christensen's and Lægreid's article on Norwegians' trust in government. Citizens' attitude toward the public administration is one of the fields where the disciplinary borders between public administration, political science, and sociology are disappearing. Traditional explanations of confidence in the public administration tended to focus on short-term experiences with high impact agencies and on the performance of specific services. Recently, political culture variables, long-term identities and variables based on diffuse support for the system have found their place in public administration research. Similarly, the importance of public services is being recognized in trust in government research, since it is acknowledged that public services are a central element in the citizen-government interaction. A combination of the two approaches shows that there does not exist something as a single concept of public administration. Instead, attitudes differ depending on the level of government that is studied. Del Pino's contribution shows how the public administration and the political science disciplines can be successfully combined.

There are often loose connections between specific experiences in individual cases and more general attitudes toward the government. It is perfectly possible to trust most government officials but to still distrust government at a more diffuse level. This means

that the measurement of trust in government and satisfaction with the functioning of public services is a particularly tricky issue, prone to misinterpretation. Determining how citizens' evaluation of specific public services influences their overall attitude toward government implies that this attitude can be distinguished empirically. Van de Walle, Kampen and Bouckaert show what the possible consequences of not recognizing this problem can be.

Trust, both in specific public services and in government in general, is often identified as a must-have. The focus in most of the reform discourse is on extra-organizational trust. Trust does not only have an extra-organizational dimension. Trust also is a powerful force in the internal functioning of organizations. The value-chain approach takes high internal performance and trust as a prerequisite for external performance and trust. As is the case in the government-citizen interaction, relations of trust are said to reduce overhead costs, and is frequently contrasted to contractual steering relations (Coulson, 1998).

Quality systems and models are introduced in organizations not only to improve the quality of an organization, but also as trust-creating elements. New types of contracts and systems attempt to compensate for the lack of trust and try to show the outside world the organization can be trusted. The increased urge to implement these kinds of trust-schemes should not only be interpreted as a wish to improve the organization and to build trust, but should also be understood as another symptom of the disappearance of trust, as Berg will show in her contribution.

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