

Helping the Kiwi to Fly: Creating World-Class Organizations in New Zealand Through a Benchmarking Initiative

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ABSTRACT *This paper describes an innovative approach to fast-tracking a group of organizations towards world-class performance. The New Zealand Benchmarking Club, formed in May 2000, currently comprises 18 organizations that are striving to achieve an ambitious vision of 'World-class performance by members and widespread adoption of excellent business practices within New Zealand'. Club processes include (1) workshops for sharing best practices; (2) benchmarking projects for undertaking focused best practice studies; (3) an annual business excellence assessment; (4) a business excellence results sharing meeting; (5) benchmarking research support; (6) partnerships to identify and disseminate best practices; and (7) access to a benchmarking and performance improvement website resource. All of these processes are continually improved to help members to identify and adopt better business practices. Findings from the first three years of operation show that the Club is on track to fulfil its vision as members improve their self-assessment scores by approximately 50 points per year. Analysis of the Club's self-assessment results is adding to the general understanding of business excellence. Results provide evidence that if an organization's management systems improve (as assessed by the Baldrige criteria) their business results will improve. Research also shows that the strongest relationship between the Baldrige criteria items is between 'customer focused results' and 'financial and market results'.*

KEY WORDS: Benchmarking, benchmarking clubs, business excellence, self assessment, consortiums

Introduction

While there is a wealth of literature on benchmarking development, definitions and typologies, inhibiting and facilitating factors, there is a relative lack of studies discussing the effective working of benchmarking clubs. Over the last three years, a number of innovative initiatives in the area of benchmarking and business excellence have been launched by the Centre for Organisational Excellence Research (COER) in New Zealand. This includes the formation of the New Zealand Benchmarking Club (NZBC) and the development of a

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Benchmarking and Performance Improvement Resource (www.bpir.com), which went online in 2002. This paper reports on the unique workings of the NZBC and its application of benchmarking to accelerate a group of organizations to world-class performance levels (as measured by the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence or CPE). The progress of the Club members to date is presented in summary form.

The Knowledge Gap Within New Zealand, and the Role of Benchmarking and Self-assessment

The need for organizations to improve towards world-class performance is, of course, generally recognised in NZ as elsewhere. However, as the NZ Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF) has recently stated, 'Striving for excellence is not, it seems, a prevalent Kiwi characteristic' (NZBEF, 2001). This claim is supported with the evidence that, in the past ten years, only two NZ firms have achieved world-class status. The NZBEF concludes that 'if New Zealand wants to get back into the OECD's top 10 of performing economies, by 2010, then more businesses will have to become committed to achieving world-class performance'. 'World-class performance' is defined by the NZBEF as performance that is recognized as world-class against the 'standard' criteria of excellence models such as the CPE. It is generally acknowledged that a score of at least 600 from 1000 points is required to be considered as world-class.

The relationship between the use of business excellence models and improved performance is well documented. In both the US and Australia, through the use of fictitious indices in which a notional \$1000 is invested in Baldrige Award winners against companies in the US 'Standard and Poor's 500' and Australia's 'ASX All Ordinaries' indices, data have suggested that the award winners consistently outperform the others, generally by a ratio in excess of three to one¹ (NIST, 2003; BEA, 2003). Besides enhanced financial performance, adoption of a business excellence approach has been well documented as resulting in a number of organizational and customer-focused benefits (see COER, 2002, for examples).

Organizations assess their management systems and performance against business excellence models, as they provide a recognized approach for evaluating organizational performance, and comparing that performance to standard benchmark levels, or with the performance of other organizations. Self-assessment does not lead to the adoption of best practices or create significant improvement per se. To achieve significant performance improvements as assessed against these models it is necessary for organizations to have an external focus and continually search for and adopt or adapt better practices. Networking and external benchmarking are key mechanisms by which organizations can achieve this. A report prepared by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1996) concluded that the most effective learning mechanisms are inter-firm networks, adding that 'the economies that networks of firms can attain by co-operation are not restricted to those of scale or scope but also embrace "economies of co-operation" in areas such as learning'. Recent figures from the NZ Ministry for Economic Development's

Firm Foundations report (MED, 2002a), however, indicated that fewer than 50% of NZ businesses conduct any form of benchmarking, while fewer than 2% undertake best practice benchmarking, which is the form most likely to bring about an improvement towards world-class performance (as best practice benchmarking provides the understanding of why another organization is performing better).

Hinton *et al.* (2000) identify a number of facilitators and inhibitors of successful benchmarking. One key inhibiting factors tends to be organization size, whereby organizations 'feel that they are too small to gain anything' by benchmarking. This finding is particularly relevant in the NZ context where 87% of businesses have five or fewer, and 97% fewer than 20, employees (MED 2002b). Hinton *et al.* conclude their article with a number of recommendations for successful benchmarking, including the central importance of an internal facilitator, and the need for novice benchmarkers to utilize external experience. This may be achieved by co-opting someone with experience, working with an experienced partner or joining a benchmarking club or network. Instances of benchmarking clubs, and of the role played by benchmarking clubs in actively facilitating the benchmarking and networking process, both within and across sectors can be found in a variety of articles, including: Bowerman *et al.* (2002—health services); Burcher (1997—pharmaceutical sector); Maire (2002—cross-industry); Davis (1998—local authorities); Dale *et al.* (1995—sports club); Mann *et al.* (1999—food industry); Voss *et al.* (1994—various manufacturing); Jackson (2001—universities); Favret (2000—libraries); Ogden & Wilson (2001—leisure management).

The Centre for Organisational Excellence Research (COER), and the NZ Benchmarking Club (NZBC)

Until recently there had been little research within NZ investigating and raising awareness of business excellence, benchmarking and best practices. This, combined with the inhibiting effect of the small size of organizations within NZ, has had an apparent (from the evidence in the previous section) detrimental effect on the uptake of these improvement techniques/approaches. Addressing this perceived deficiency was a primary driver behind the formation of the COER within Massey University. Table 1 illustrates the Centre's strategy of acquiring, sharing and building upon knowledge. This paper focuses upon the third element of the Centre's operations, namely the New Zealand Benchmarking Club (NZBC).

The NZBC was formed in May 2000, through a partnership between COER and the NZBEF. The Club currently comprises 18 diverse organizations, each striving to achieve an ambitious stated vision of 'World-class performance by members and widespread adoption of excellent business practices within New Zealand'. Membership of the Club is currently restricted to a total of 25 organizations to ensure that the high level of trust and understanding amongst Club members, which is regarded as essential for benchmarking and sharing of best practices, is maintained. Potential Club members have to pass a rigorous

Table 1. Core activities of the Centre for Organisational Excellence Research (COER), Massey University

Acquiring knowledge →	Sharing knowledge	Applying knowledge
<p>Partnerships/Alliances Partnerships/alliances enable COER to bring best practices to NZ and share its own research findings worldwide. Partnerships include: The NZ Business Excellence Foundation, NZ Institute of Management, Business Excellence Australia, Best Practice Club UK, Global Benchmarking Network, Work Foundation (UK); MCB (UK); Industry Week (US), Harrington Institute (US), Centre for Business Performance (UK)</p> <p>Best Practice Research Undertaken via PhD researchers on their own or through working with the NZ Benchmarking Club.</p>	<p>Benchmarking & Performance Improvement Resource— www.BPIR.com Comprehensive website on benchmarking, best practices, performance measurement, business excellence and performance improvement. Provides full access to over 150,000 cases and articles.</p> <p>Promotion and Publications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● COER's Website (COER.org.nz) ● Best Practice Reports ● Journal Papers, Articles, and COER News ● COER's Annual Benchmarking Conference and Tour 	<p>NZ Benchmarking Club (NZBC) The Club is the flagship Club for NZ business. Its vision is 'World-class performance by members and widespread adoption of excellent practices within New Zealand'. With a membership of 18 leading NZ organizations it aims 'to help its members work towards achieving over 700 points against the CPE'.</p> <p>Benchmarking Services Provision of specific benchmarking services such as the benchmark index, self-assessment, benchmarking training, discussion groups, benchmarking studies, literature searches, and partnering.</p>

selection process that considers each applicant in terms of: (a) the value they will add to the Club (assessed by the best practices they bring with them); (b) the diversity balance of the Club (based on size, location, sector, and culture), and; (c) the level of their commitment to the Club's values and strategy. Once selected, they are invited to join and pay the annual membership fee.

The Benchmarking Club format has been designed fully to engage each member organization in the process of organizational improvement. The bond amongst the members is the desire to improve the business performance of not only Club members but also all organizations in NZ. Working together, the members seek (1) to identify strengths and weaknesses of each membership organization's business practices; (2) collectively to conduct research on best business practices available in NZ and the world; and (3) to apply this acquired knowledge to membership organizations' business practices in the areas of identified weaknesses. Repeating this cyclical process, they strive to make progress against the Club's vision of world-class performance. Regular self-assessment against the CPE is the mechanism by which the NZBC tracks the improvement of its members. All Club members are set a target to increase their business

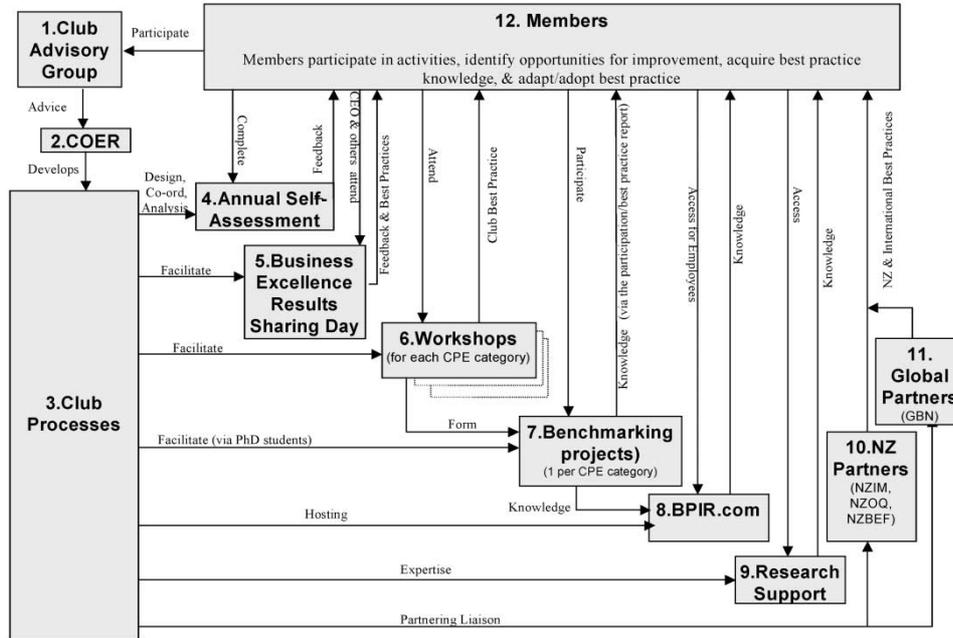


Figure 1. The NZBC operation and processes

excellence score by at least 50 points per year so that, over time, all Club members are scoring world-class scores of over 700 points.

NZBC Operation—Where the Rubber meets the Road

An overview of the operation of the Club is provided in Figure 1 and an explanation of how it operates follows.

The NZBC is led and managed by COER (box 2). To obtain buy-in of Club members to the Club’s future direction and services, a Club Advisory Group (box 1), consisting of representatives from Club members, works with COER to develop a strategic plan, monitor progress against the strategic plan and develop appropriate operations/services. Through working together this has led to the development of seven key processes to accelerate members’ performance. These are as follows.

- *Self-assessments* (box 4). All Club members undertake an annual CPE self-assessment. The CPE assessment tool they use provides feedback to members on their strengths and opportunities for improvement, and benchmarks their performance against other members across the seven CPE categories and 19 items. The seven CPE categories cover all aspects of business operations: (a) leadership; (b) strategic planning; (c) customer and market focus; (d) measurement, analysis and knowledge management; (e) human resources focus; (f) process management; and (g) business results achieved, and the 19 CPE items provide a further breakdown of these. The self-assessment process

typically involves the input of 50 man-hours per company (involving a team of 6–8 people). The value Club members obtain from the self-assessment is significant; the self-assessment enables each Club member organization (and their self-assessment team) to learn more about the elements of world-class performance and systematically to identify issues of major concern to their organization; and to develop actions to address them.

- *Business Excellence Results Sharing Meeting* (box 5). This is the Club's premier event of the year and is attended by all Club members, including the senior management teams of these organizations. At this meeting, an overview of the Club's results is given, and the names of the top three organizations per CPE item are shared so that other organizations know which Club members to approach so that they can learn from the better performers. In addition, presentations are given by the leading Club member organizations and a session is held on how best to move forward as a collective and improve members' performance based on the Club's self-assessment results.
- *Workshops* (box 6). One-day workshops are held on a quarterly basis at which all Club member organizations attend. Each is focused on a different CPE category (excluding the CPE Business Results category) so that, over time, Club members learn the key foundations to world-class performance. Attendees of workshops (approximately 120 annually) are managers whose responsibilities are linked to the category area. This not only ensures that the most appropriate person is present but it also ensures there is a much wider buy-in of the improvement process within each organization. Prior to each meeting, Club members complete a 'mini self-assessment' so that at the workshop they are prepared to share their better and weaker practices (the latter as opportunities for improvement). Apart from exchanging ideas/views with one another, Club members have the opportunity to learn from invited speakers representing non-Club organizations that use best/better practices in the topic category. A major output from each workshop is the identification of a key opportunity for improvement that is of concern to the majority of members. To address this opportunity, a benchmarking project is then set up to identify national and international best practices in the category area. This means that, at any point in time, as there are six CPE enabling categories there are usually six benchmarking projects in operation.
- *Benchmarking Projects* (box 7). The purpose of these benchmarking projects is twofold. First, to identify national and international best practices in the selected practice area. Secondly, they provide assistance to Club members on how to adopt and adapt the acquired knowledge to actual business operations. Membership is voluntary and typically consists of 5 to 10 Club member organizations. Each project is led by one of the Club members and facilitated by one of COER's PhD students. The team members set the Terms of Reference, operating procedures and project methodology. Projects generally involve an analysis of members' processes and performance, a literature review of international best practices, discussions with experts in the topic area, surveys to identify best practice organizations, and visits to best practice organizations. Project findings are presented to all Club members and typically published as a best practice report. Individual member organizations then

Table 2. The NZBC benchmarking process (adapted from Codling, 1992)

Project selection	Benchmarking	Application
<i>The NZBC members ...</i>	<i>The benchmarking project team ...</i>	<i>The NZBC members then ...</i>
1. Select a subject area at a workshop (attended by all members)	2. Defines the process 3. Profiles potential partners 4. Identifies data sources 5. Collects data 6. Establishes best practice	7. Establish process differences 8. Target future performance 9. Communicates information 10. Set and adjust the goal 11. Implement changes 12. Review process and set future goals

review the findings of the workgroup and adapt and adopt the practices for their own use. Examples of two benchmarking projects that have been completed are ‘to identify best practices in strategy deployment’ and ‘to identify best practices in developing leadership capability’.

To guide the Club’s benchmarking process the Club has adapted Codling’s 12-step benchmarking approach (Codling, 1992), summarized in Table 2.

- *Benchmarking and Performance Improvement Resource* (box 8). Members are given free access to BPIR.com. This is a resource that enables members to conduct their own research into best practices and compare their performance against 100s of best practice benchmarks. This resource, developed by COER, was launched in April 2002 and aims to be the premier best practice resource worldwide.
- *Research Support* (box 9). COER has a team of PhD researchers that are supporting the NZBC. Each PhD student is studying best practices in one of the CPE categories. The students are in constant contact with the NZBC, sharing their findings on organizational performance excellence with the members. They also facilitate the Club’s benchmarking projects in the area that is most related to their own PhD research. This collaboration provides a win-win situation for both researchers and Club members: on one hand, the researchers learn considerably from their contacts with ‘real’ business people (mostly senior managers). On the other hand, Club members are kept informed of the most-up-to-date academic theories and findings.
- *Partnerships* (boxes 10 and 11). Partnerships with leading management institutions assist the Club in meeting the second part of its mission: ‘Widespread adoption of excellence business practices within NZ’, COER has formed a number of strategic alliances inside and outside NZ. Formal partnerships within NZ have been formed with the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF), New Zealand Institute of Management (NZIM) and the New Zealand Organisation for Quality (NZOQ). Relationships with these organizations enable the NZBC’s benchmarking teams to contact and survey a multitude of organizations in NZ, and this provides a key mechanism for disseminating NZBC’s best practice findings. On an international basis, the

NZBC is a member of the Global Benchmarking Network (GBN). The GBN consists of those organizations/associations, deemed as the experts in their particular country in terms of actively promoting organizational performance through benchmarking. It currently represents over 20 countries and, through memberships of these organizations, covers over 20,000 organizations worldwide.

Transfer of Best Practices

The previous section outlined the key processes of the NZ Benchmarking club. Through the use of these processes, at the time of writing, six benchmarking studies have been completed, 12 workshops, three business excellence results sharing days, three self-assessments and one year's access to the BPIR.com for members. Therefore over a three-year period members have had access to a considerable amount of information that can help them to improve their processes (this flow of information to Members, box 12, is represented in Figure 1). However, the NZBC has recognized that this provision of information does not necessarily mean that members, even when they have the best intentions, will be able effectively to transfer this information into knowledge and improve their practices. In addition to generic barriers to effective benchmarking as identified in research (e.g. that of Hinton *et al.*, 2000) the club has therefore had to develop a number of strategies to overcome specific hurdles as they have been encountered.

Table 3 summarizes generic and specific (to NZBC experience) barriers to effective benchmarking that are generally believed to exist, or have been encountered, and the means by which the NZBC addresses these. Through the club's experience, the authors are able to recommend the following approaches, which may be of benefit to other clubs.

Does the Club Work?

Whilst COER and the Club Advisory Group have a good understanding (through satisfaction surveys and discussions with members) of how the Club's processes are helping to improve member organizations, the prime way that the Club measures its success is through monitoring the improvement in members' self-assessment scores against a target of at least 50 points per year. Ultimately, it is hoped that through 50 point improvements year on year, an average Club score of 700 points will be achieved, thus indicating that members have achieved world-class performance levels.

On average, all club members (as at the end of 2002) considered together, improved their point score by 22 points in 2002, compared with 57 points in 2001 (an increase of 39.5 points per year, which is less than the 50-point target). However, when the scores data are stratified between established members and new members, the seven 'established' members (i.e. those that have been with the club since its inception, and have now undertaken three self-assessments) have improved their median score from 260 points in 2000, to 287 points in 2001, to 362 points in 2002 (an average of 51 points per year). In summary, the Club is

Table 3. Best practice transfer issues and solutions

Inhibitor to successful benchmarking	How NZBC addresses
<p>Generic barriers and solutions</p> <p>Organizations may feel they are too small to benefit from benchmarking.</p> <p>A facilitator or champion is required</p> <p>Lack of internal expertise on benchmarking.</p> <p>There needs to be a frank and free exchange of ideas.</p> <p>No objective measure of progress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● NZBC member organizations range in size so that the smaller organisation can share practices with, and learn from, the larger ones ● Each NZBC member selects two dedicated champions or representatives (a main and a deputy representative) to both represent the firm and ensure the knowledge gained penetrates and permeates through the firm. Two are selected to ensure that relationships and knowledge are not lost if one of them moves on from this position. ● The NZBC organizations receive the expert advice and support of the COER/NZBC dedicated staff of academics, practitioners and PhD scholars ● NZBC workshops and projects encourage the free exchange of information and ideas. ● Regular self-assessment against the CPE is the mechanism by which NZBC tracks the improvement of its members. Members share a common goal of a 50-point improvement per annum.
<p>Specific barriers and solutions</p> <p>Information gained from attending workshops and benchmarking projects is not widely shared</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Members are encouraged to set-up a benchmarking club team or business excellence team whereby each member of the team is responsible for a different CPE category. These individuals attend the relevant Club meetings and share their findings at regular internal meetings. ● Minutes (documenting best practices) from all meetings are published and available from the nzbc.org.nz website (members areas) for all staff from each organization.
<p>Best Practice information gained from benchmarking projects is not applied</p> <p>The right people attend the right events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● COER provides on-site presentations and workshops to assist members in applying the findings from benchmarking studies ● Dates for major meetings that require senior management attendance are set one year in advance ● Information on meeting dates is accessible for all staff from each organization from the nzbc.org.nz website (members area)
<p>Senior management commitment may be lacking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Membership to join the Club is by invitation only. Organizations that wish to join submit an Expression of Interest. Representatives from the Club then meet with the organization's senior management team to assess their level of commitment to world-class performance. Based on this commitment being there (and other selection factors being met) they will then be invited to join the Club. ● An annual liaison visit to the senior management team of each member organization helps to build relationships and maintain commitment

Table 3. Continued

Inhibitor to successful benchmarking	How NZBC addresses
Lack of resource/expertise to follow through and implement the best practice findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An annual liaison visit helps to identify potential resource issues that the member is facing and suggests potential solutions • Members are encouraged to use the action planning process developed by COER for prioritizing actions based on their likely impact on improving CPE scores. This system helps to ensure that resources are used effectively.

making progress. However, it appears that it will take a number of years for the majority of Club members to become world-class at this rate, as the average score for the Club is 278 points.

Self-assessment Findings: Disseminating the Knowledge

The Club's vision is 'world-class performance by members, and widespread adoption of best practices throughout NZ'. The Club aims to achieve the second part of the vision through sharing its best practice findings to non-members through publications and presentations. Whilst much of the Club's work identifies specific best practices that can be immediately applied by organizations, other research is improving New Zealand's and the wider community's understanding on business excellence. Some of the findings relating to business excellence are described in this section.

Over the last three years, COER has collected data from 35 CPE self-assessments from NZBC member organizations. An analysis of this data has provided an insight into the relationships between different business drivers and how they impact on business results. As part of this analysis, nearly 300 potential relationships between the 7 CPE categories and 18 CPE items have been investigated. In total, 18 strong, significant correlations ($0.7 < r < 0.9$) and 201 moderate, significant correlations ($0.4 < r < 0.7$) have been found between CPE categories and items.

As an example, the strongest correlation identified was between 'Customer Focused Results' and 'Financial and Market Results' (a correlation of 0.85). This correlation is shown in Figure 2 with the dots representing the CPE % scores of member organizations for the two items. A good linear fit was obtained, and the resulting least squares trend line implies that if an organisation improves its Customer Focused Results then an improvement in Financial and Market Results, within the 95% confidence limits shown on the graph, can reasonably be expected to result. Clearly, a correlation coefficient indicates the strength of a relationship and not the cause and so further investigative work is required to be certain of the implied causal relationship.

From COER's initial analysis of all the relationships identified it is apparent that there are many inter-dependencies between categories and items that need

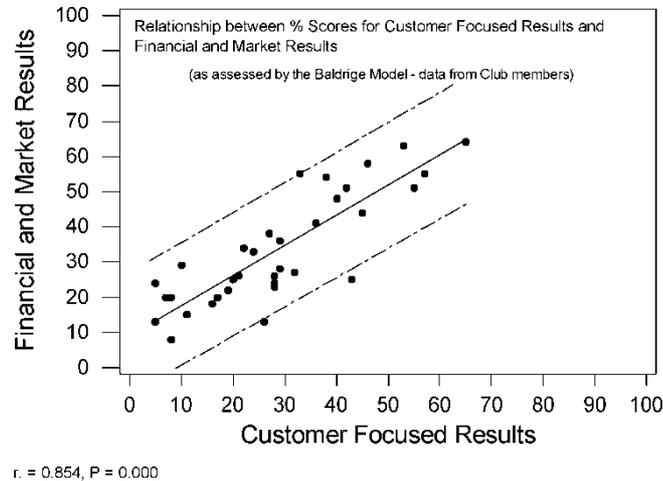


Figure 2. Relationship between ‘customer focus’ results and ‘financial and market’ results

to be explored further to identify, for instance, which business drivers have the largest impact on Business Results. To date a moderate correlation ($r=0.6$) has been identified between the CPE ‘Enablers’ (the aggregate of categories 1 to 6) and ‘Business Results’. This indicates that those organizations that have better management systems across these categories are also likely to have better Business Results. The authors are currently undertaking a more in-depth analysis of the self-assessment data. The complete results and detailed analysis of the self-assessment’s findings and methodology used will be presented in a future paper (in preparation). In the meantime further findings can be found in *COER News* (COER, 2003).

Conclusions

Initial research findings indicate that the NZBC is making progress towards its vision of ‘world-class performance by members’. The Club’s processes, such as the provision of benchmarking projects, and the ‘Benchmarking and Performance Improvement Resource’ are assisting member organizations to improve. The second repeat cycle of CPE self-assessments by NZ Benchmark Club members indicates that, on average, a 40-point annual increase has been achieved against the CPE (51 points for established members). The target improvement is 50 points per year. In addition, many correlations have been identified between business excellence criteria items and categories, of which a number support the case that following a business excellence approach will result in improved business results (and lead towards world-class performance).

Note

1. However, it is noted that in 2003, for the first time in nine years, the Baldrige Index performed worse than the Standard and Poor’s 500.

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