

Performance Measurement in Probation Employment Pathfinder

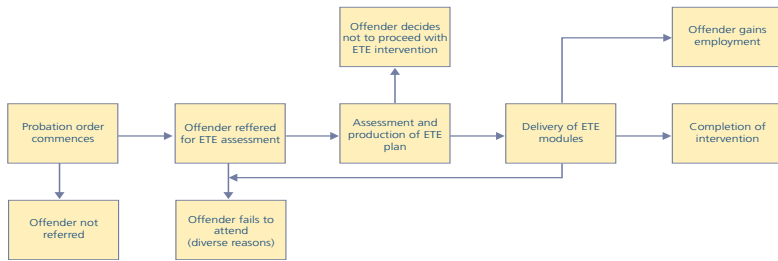
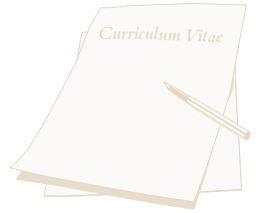
From Possibility...

The Probation Service in the UK has gone through major change over the last five years. The focus has moved from one of coaching and mentoring offenders to an approach much more focused on the development of skills and competencies and the use of specific interventions to reduce the risk of reoffending. Performance targets are set in many more areas than previously and performance against those targets is tracked, with poor performance demanding improvement action. The primary aim of the Probation Service is now very clearly to reduce rates of reoffending amongst offenders on probation, unpaid work or licence.

The Employment Pathfinder 2 project was established by the National Probation Directorate in 2004 to test a long-held belief in the Criminal Justice Sector – namely, that offenders who gained employment were less likely to reoffend than those who did not. The Employment Pathfinder (EP2) was piloted in seven different probation areas to assess the impact of Education, Training and Employment orders (ETE) on reoffending rates. The ETE intervention was made up of a menu of 11 different training modules that could be delivered one-to-one or in a group to tackle issues such as disclosure of offences to potential employers, CV writing or interview skills. Offenders would be assessed and a training plan drawn up. This could consist of between one and up to the full eleven modules delivered over a series of weekly sessions. The training was judged to have been completed when the planned training was complete or when the offender had gained employment.

After a year it appeared that the number of completions of the training and support interventions would not be sufficient to provide the research information required, so Ad Esse were asked to work with individual probation areas to see how process thinking could increase the rate of completions.

The basic process is that an order commences, the offender may or may not be referred for an ETE assessment by the Offender Manager, the assessment is carried out (usually by a third-party, non-probation assessor) and then the offender chooses to progress with the ETE training or not. The modules in the plan (plus any extras that come up during the training) are delivered and the training recorded as 'completed'.



To Actuality...

Although there were many issues that were preventing the target number of completions being achieved, concerning definition of roles, communication of targets, and buy-in of Offender Managers, the lack of effective measurement and tracking of performance meant that these were not always identified or dealt with.

Two glaring errors were committed with respect to the measurement of performance:

1. Incidents were recorded rather than individuals being tracked,
2. Performance was reported based on monthly figures rather than by monthly cohort.

REPORTING OF INCIDENTS NOT INDIVIDUALS

As can be seen from the process map above, offenders were referred for assessment but, offenders being offenders, some did not attend, so they were often referred again. All probation areas reported the number of assessments conducted as a percentage of referrals. The net effect of this was to make performance look worse than it actually was.

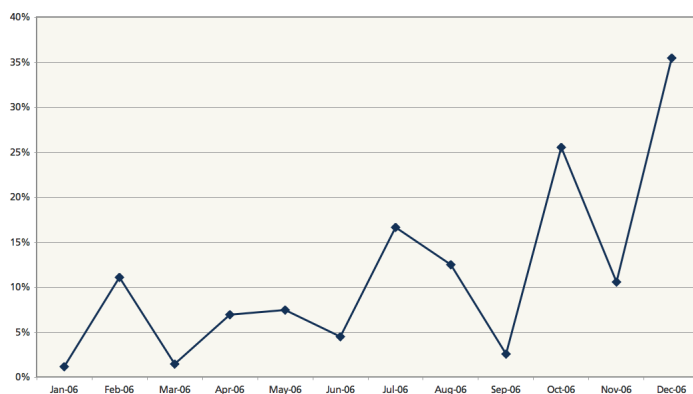
The reason was as follows. If five offenders were referred, one of whom attended first time, two of whom attended second time and two of whom missed both appointments, the actual attendance at assessments was 60% (three offenders out of five). The figure reported in probation figures was 30% (three assessments attended out of nine appointments given). Whilst the number of assessments attended would be of interest to those having to resource the sessions, the actual number of offenders actually attending appointments was of much more interest to the service, but was not reported.

This method of calculating attendances is common across probation and leads to under-reporting of performance on a number of programmes.

REPORTING MONTHLY FIGURES RATHER THAN MONTHLY COHORTS

A second number reported each month was completions as a percentage of commencements or as a percentage of referrals. This led to very confused data, and the inability to spot any patterns or trends in data. The following graph shows the performance of an imaginary Area of completions as a percentage of commencements.

COMPLETION PERCENTAGE USING MONTHLY PERCENTAGES



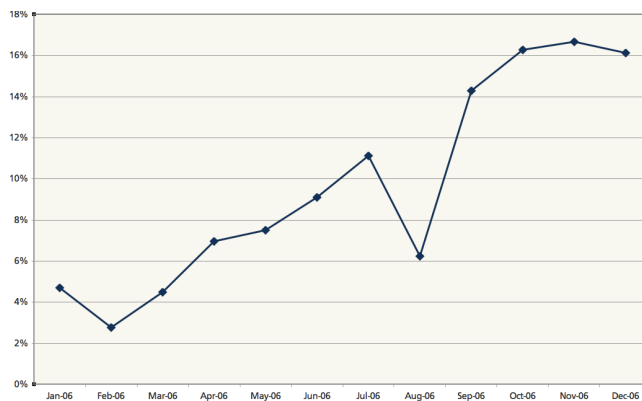
As we can see from the graph, performance seems to move up and down randomly each month, although there appears to be a gradual increase in performance.

The reason why this data is so variable is that it is measuring the wrong thing. It is reporting on the number of completions in a month as a percentage of the number of commencements in the same month. However, someone who commences their sentence in July is unlikely to complete their ETE training in July. They are more likely to complete in August or September and some offenders could take four or five months to complete their training plans. Unless the numbers commencing are the same each month (which they are most definitely not in all the probation areas) then this measure will always produce random peaks and troughs.

What is needed is to measure a monthly cohort. Each offender who commences in that month is tracked as part of that monthly cohort. Even if the offender who commenced in July completes four months later, his completion is recorded in July's data. This has the advantage of showing a true performance for the month, giving managers the ability to spot trends in the data and also to see how many people are left 'in-process' because they have not emerged through any of the exit points.

The following graph shows exactly the same data tracked by monthly cohort.

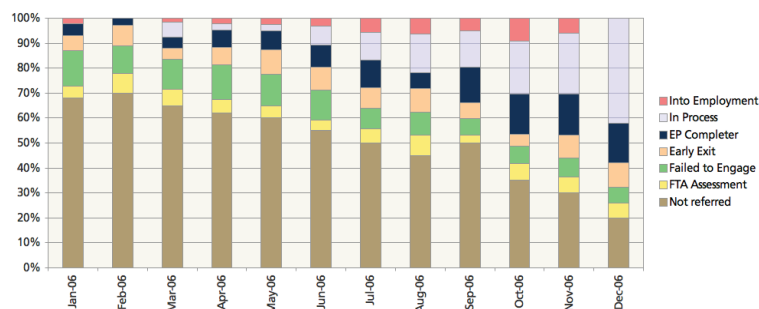
PERCENTAGE COMPLETION USING COHORT ANALYSIS



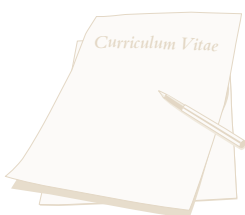
Here we can clearly see that there has been a steady improvement in the completion rate, with one bad month in August and a tailing-off of improvement in the latter months (which is actually explained by the fact that more offenders are still 'in-process' and so are likely to complete in the future). We would recommend all percentages of performance be reported in this way

Also, because we are tracking a cohort, we can actually take a snapshot at any period of time and see what is the latest state of our cohort.

The following graph shows the monthly numbers for commencements, referrals and outcomes, using the monthly cohort analysis.

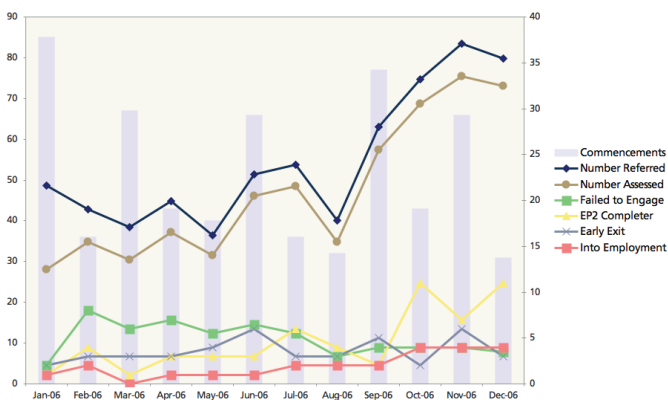
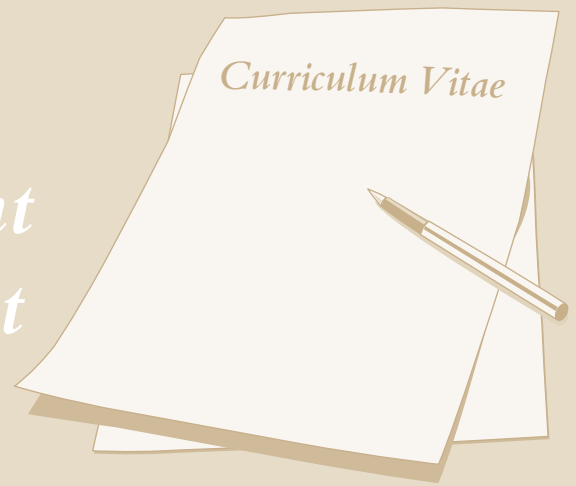


Here we can discern a clear reduction in the proportion of offenders not referred for assessment. We can also see a reduction in the proportion of failures to attend assessment. Equally importantly, we can clearly see how many offenders from each month's cohort are still in the system.



Compare this to the monthly analysis (over page) using exactly the same data, but using monthly numbers for each category, with the number of referrals on the left-hand scale and all the other numbers on the right-hand scale. Although we are presenting the same basic data, because it is shown with running monthly totals, there is no discernable trend, nor is it possible to see how many offenders are 'still in there somewhere'.

Performance Measurement in Probation Employment Pathfinder



CONCLUSIONS

Having the right measures to inform staff and managers about how a process is performing is essential in any organisation. In this case, where we are concerned with individuals, then it is what happens to the individuals that must be measured. The measurement of people, not activities and the measurement of cohorts, not monthly percentages, will give any organisation managing programmes a good picture of what is happening and whether performance is improving or getting worse.

In the probation areas that have adopted this cohort measurement and reporting system it has allowed identification of problems and the sources of problems to be made. It has allowed the fair comparison of different offices' performance and has led to an improvement in performance.

Measurement, of itself, is unlikely to create improvement. But if we have the right measures we can evaluate performance, draw comparisons between different groups and spot trends, creating the right conditions for improvement to take place.

ad·esse
consulting

FURTHER INFORMATION

To receive regular case studies and articles like this one, you can subscribe to our newsletter 'Actualty'. Contact us at Ad Esse Consulting Ltd.

PHONE: +44 (0) 870 458 6162 EMAIL: seriousfun@ad-esse.com WEBSITE: www.ad-esse.com