

## Performance Management in Social Services: Practices and Challenges

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### Abstract

*The aim of the paper is to analyze the impact of performance management on the efficiency and professionalization of social work organizations, considering the specific challenges of this field. The study explores concepts such as goal setting, performance evaluation, feedback and recognition of merits, as well as new ethical and operational challenges.*

*The methodology combines questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with employees and managers to collect data on their perceptions and experiences related to performance management. The data analysis highlights the challenges and methods used to optimize management processes in social work organizations.*

*The conclusions emphasize the positive impact of performance management on organizational efficiency, emphasizing the importance of the balance between efficiency and ethical responsibility, and offer future research directions for the development of new evaluation methods adapted to the specifics of social interventions.*

**Key words:** performance management, social assistance, feedback, personal development, transparency and accountability

**J.E.L. classification:** I38, M12, L31, M54, D73

### 1. Introduction

In today's context, within the social assistance sector, performance management represents a fundamental process to ensure the optimal use of resources—often limited both financially and especially in human terms—and to achieve organizational objectives aimed at supporting vulnerable communities. This process involves a systematic approach through which organizations align their resources and activities to maximize results (Armstrong et al., 2005, pp. 15-30). The authors highlight that effective performance management not only supports improved efficiency but also contributes to creating a work environment that encourages and motivates human resources.

In Romanian literature, the work "Managementul serviciilor de asistență socială" (Management of Social Assistance Services) by Neamțu (2015) emphasizes the importance of performance management in social assistance organizations, noting that it must also lead to a change in organizational culture. This is because social assistance work frequently exposes employees to complex emotional, social, and stress-related challenges that are sometimes difficult to manage.

Beyond improving the efficiency of activities, performance management can enhance transparency and accountability in organizations, where beneficiaries and civil society are increasingly interested in the quality and fairness of services provided. According to Pulakos in *Performance Management: A New Approach for Driving Business Results* (Pulakos, 2009, pp. 22-40), the performance evaluation process allows for a systematic approach to tracking employee progress and establishing clear performance expectations. In this way, a well-implemented system becomes an essential tool for ensuring service quality in the social sector.

The purpose of this research is to analyze how performance management in social assistance supports social development by increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of social services. It also examines the challenges of implementing performance management in a field often characterized by budget constraints and the difficulty of measuring progress in a quantifiable, objective manner. Social assistance organizations face growing pressure from civil society and other stakeholders to justify the efficient use of resources and deliver higher-quality services. In this context, implementing a performance management system is a strategy that can deliver concrete results. Aguinis, in *Performance Management* (Aguinis, 2009, pp. 45-55), argues that such a system not only supports organizations in achieving their mission but also contributes to the professional development of human resources, which is a key factor in reaching organizational goals.

Behn, in *Why Measure Performance? Different Purposes Require Different Measures* (Behn, 2003, pp. 586-606) underscores that performance measurement in the public sector, and implicitly in social assistance, requires a careful balance between objective and subjective criteria.

## **2. Theoretical background. The Concept of Performance Management in Social Assistance**

The concept of performance management refers to a structured process of evaluating, monitoring, and continuously improving performance within an organization to maximize outcomes and achieve established objectives. Pulakos, in *Performance Management: A New Approach for Driving Business Results* (Pulakos, 2009, pp. 22-40), describes performance management as more than a periodic employee evaluation; it includes complex processes such as goal setting, providing constant feedback and supporting professional development. This approach fosters a paradigm shift in human resource management, focusing on long-term results and organizational commitment to continuous performance improvement.

In the context of social assistance, this approach takes on particular nuances, as organizations in this field work with vulnerable groups and often have missions aimed at supporting and developing the communities they serve. Thus, performance management in this sector is not only about economic or efficiency goals but also about ensuring quality and equity in service delivery. This requires a balance between objective evaluation and a personalized, empathetic approach that considers the complexity of cases managed by social assistance staff.

Performance management plays an important role in aligning organizational objectives with beneficiaries' needs, contributing to better resource allocation and increased efficiency in service delivery. Aguinis, in *Performance Management* (Aguinis, 2009, pp. 45-55), argues that an efficient performance management system can significantly enhance an organization's capacity to fulfill its mission and better meet the needs of the communities it serves. Aligning organizational objectives with beneficiaries' needs is not just a strategic direction but a necessity for improving the impact of social assistance services. The same author highlights the importance of integrating qualitative dimensions, such as the quality of interactions with beneficiaries and adherence to the organization's ethical values, alongside quantitative performance measurement.

For example, in social assistance, a relevant performance indicator might be not only the number of cases handled by an employee but also the quality of support provided, as measured by beneficiary feedback and qualitative evaluations of the interventions performed.

Under these circumstances, the role of performance management in social assistance extends beyond mere individual performance monitoring. It includes ensuring a work environment that promotes professionalism, empathy, and respect for beneficiaries. This can contribute to building an organizational culture based on responsibility and social benefit orientation, enabling social assistance organizations to better fulfill their mission and optimize their impact on the community.

Setting clear and measurable objectives is an essential element in performance management, enabling organizations to align employees' activities with the overall strategy. Neamțu, in *Managementul serviciilor de asistență socială* (Neamțu, 2015, p.45-60), emphasizes that in the social assistance sector, objectives must be customized to address both organizational needs and those of the beneficiaries.

Thus, alongside measurable results, such as the number of resolved cases, significant importance is given to qualitative aspects, such as the quality of interventions and relationships with beneficiaries. Neamțu proposes a participatory approach to setting objectives, where employees are actively involved to understand and support the organization's priorities.

Performance evaluation is the process through which employees' achievement of objectives is analyzed. Lazăr and colleagues, in *Perspective asupra sistemului și serviciilor de asistență socială din România* (Lazăr et al., 2020, p.78-95), explain that, in the context of social assistance, evaluations should include both quantitative indicators (e.g., number of managed cases) and qualitative ones (e.g., beneficiary satisfaction and adherence to ethical principles). The authors highlight that using a mix of objective and subjective indicators can lead to a more balanced and realistic evaluation, reflecting the complexity of social work.

It can be stated that an evaluation system, in order to be effective, must include constant feedback from the beneficiaries in order to obtain a more complete picture of the impact of the social activities provided on them. This highlights the fact that employees who receive positive feedback from beneficiaries become more motivated to continue efforts to improve the services offered.

In performance management, providing constant and constructive feedback is crucial. According to Neamțu (Neamțu, 2015, p.105-120), regular and development-oriented feedback is essential for the professional growth of social assistance employees, who often face complex and demanding social situations. Neamțu suggests that effective feedback must be personalized and provide clear directions for performance improvement.

Lazăr and his team (Lazăr et al., 2020, p.130-145) argue that a feedback-oriented organizational culture can significantly improve employee engagement and satisfaction. They recommend implementing regular feedback sessions to contribute to skills development and reduce professional stress levels.

Recognizing employees' merits is another key factor in creating a positive organizational culture. According to Lazăr and his team *Renasterea unei profesii, Sau despre cum este sa fii asistent social in Romania*, (Lazăr et al, 2016, p.95-110), recognizing employees' contributions can take various forms, from formal rewards such as prizes and bonuses to informal appreciation and advancement opportunities. It is emphasized that performance recognition not only improves employee morale, but also contributes to creating a work environment that encourages collaboration and loyalty to the organization.

Thus, in social assistance organizations, the evaluation of the performance of human resources must be adapted to the specifics of the work performed, so as to reward not only the volume of work performed, but also the quality of relationships and the positive impact on the community served.

In the social assistance sector, financial and human resources are often limited, and organizations frequently face budgetary constraints that hinder the implementation of an efficient performance management system. Hatry, in *Performance Measurement: Getting Results* (Hatry, 2006, pp. 25-38), analyzes the impact of limited resources on organizations' capacity to invest in complex performance management processes.

In public and nonprofit sectors, including social assistance, budgetary constraints often lead to compromises in setting and tracking performance objectives. Organizations are compelled to prioritize direct service provision over administrative processes. Hatry emphasizes that without investments in training, technology, and dedicated personnel, effective performance management implementation becomes difficult, which can affect an organization's ability to monitor and improve service quality.

Another major obstacle is the difficulty of objectively and quantitatively measuring results, given the complexity and subjective nature of social interactions. Behn, in *Why Measure Performance? Different Purposes Require Different Measures* (Behn, 2003, pp. 586-606) highlights that performance measurement in social domains is uniquely challenging because the objectives of these organizations cannot always be quantified.

For example, measuring success in social assistance cannot be reduced to the number of cases handled. It must also consider qualitative aspects such as the quality of relationships with beneficiaries and long-term improvements in individual situations. Behn argues that this need for complex and varied measurements makes performance management difficult to implement and sustain in social assistance organizations.

Organizational process changes, including the introduction of a new performance management system, often face employee resistance. Kotter, in *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996, pp. 35-50), explains resistance to change as a natural reaction when employees encounter new demands and responsibilities. This resistance is even more pronounced in fields where daily activities are already challenging, as is the case in social assistance. According to Kotter, a key element to overcoming resistance is communicating the benefits of change and actively involving employees in the implementation process.

In social assistance, performance management systems may be perceived as an additional burden, especially if employees view the evaluation process as strictly procedural rather than a means of support and development. Kotter recommends that leaders adopt a transparent and participative approach to reduce resistance and facilitate the transition to new performance evaluation systems.

Performance evaluation in social assistance often raises ethical and moral dilemmas, as employees work with vulnerable individuals, and evaluation criteria may sometimes seem inadequate to measure the real success of interventions. Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan, in *Performance Management in the Public Sector* (Van Dooren et al., 2010, pp. 140-155), explore the complexity of ethical dilemmas in performance evaluation in the public sector. The authors emphasize that in fields such as social assistance, it is challenging to establish performance criteria that reflect both organizational results and ethical responsibility toward beneficiaries.

For instance, evaluating employees based on the number of resolved cases can pressure them to complete cases quickly, potentially at the expense of the quality of support provided to beneficiaries. Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan suggest that organizations should consider both performance objectives and ethical values in the evaluation process to ensure employees do not feel constrained to prioritize efficiency over the well-being of beneficiaries.

### 3. Research methodology

To achieve our objectives, we analyzed how performance management influences the efficiency and quality of services provided in the field of social assistance. The research focused on identifying current practices, challenges faced, and strategies to improve performance in organizations providing social services. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods was used, ensuring a comprehensive perspective on the subject.

**Data Collection.** The study utilized two primary data sources:

1. Questionnaires. Structured questionnaires were distributed to employees in various social assistance organizations to evaluate their perceptions of performance management, feedback, and performance recognition.
2. Semi-structured Interviews. In addition to questionnaires, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers in the field of social assistance. These interviews provided detailed insights into the challenges of implementing performance management and the strategies used to overcome these challenges. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to identify patterns and trends.

**Research Methods Used.** A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used for data collection:

1. Quantitative Method. The questionnaires included both closed-ended questions (to measure perceptions quantitatively) and open-ended questions (to gather detailed and nuanced responses). The sample included 100 employees from diverse roles and organizations to provide a varied picture of existing practices.
2. Qualitative Method. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes, such as measuring the performance of human resources involved, the importance of constructive feedback, and ethical challenges. Data coding was done manually to extract essential information about best practices and lessons learned.

Although the study provides valuable insights into performance management in social assistance, it has certain limitations due to the relatively small and specific sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other social organizations. Additionally, qualitative data, while detailed, may be influenced by respondent subjectivity. However, ethical standards were strictly

observed during the study, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for participants. The data collected was used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

#### 4. Findings. Data Analysis and Interpretation of Research Results

##### a) Quantitative Analysis

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed to evaluate correlations between variables, such as feedback, performance recognition, and employee satisfaction levels. Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted to identify general trends and test initial hypotheses.

Key findings from the structured questionnaires:

- Performance evaluation systems: 72% of respondents indicated that their organization uses a formal performance evaluation system, but only 58% felt that the system is clear and well understood by employees.
- Employee feedback: Approximately 65% of respondents stated they receive periodic feedback, yet only 45% considered the feedback useful for improving their activities. This suggests that while feedback is provided, it is not always perceived as constructive or applicable.
- Performance objectives: 60% of participants reported that performance objectives are established, but many highlighted difficulties in aligning these objectives with beneficiary needs.
- Performance recognition: Only 40% of employees felt that performance recognition in their organizations is adequate and motivating. Many respondents emphasized the lack of effective non-financial reward mechanisms.

##### b) Qualitative Analysis

The semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into challenges and strategies for improving performance management:

- Challenges: Managers frequently mentioned the difficulty of objectively measuring performance given the complex and sensitive nature of social work. The lack of appropriate evaluation tools was cited as a demotivating factor for employees.
- Feedback importance: While organizations strive to provide constant feedback, it often lacks personalization and does not address employees' specific needs. Managers suggested training in feedback delivery to improve this process.
- Ethical considerations: Managers highlighted ethical dilemmas, where performance evaluations emphasizing measurable outcomes sometimes overlooked the quality of human relationships and empathy.

##### c) Correlations Identified

- Feedback and employee satisfaction: A moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.45$ ) was found between the frequency of feedback and employee satisfaction, indicating that employees receiving regular feedback tend to be more satisfied with their work.
- Clear objectives and performance: A positive correlation ( $r = 0.53$ ) was observed between the clarity of set objectives and perceived performance levels, suggesting that employees with a clear understanding of objectives perform better.

##### d) Recommendations Based on Research Results

- Improving feedback systems: Organizations should invest in training managers to provide more specific and constructive feedback perceived as helpful by employees.
- Clarifying performance objectives: Establishing clear and realistic objectives aligned with beneficiary needs can improve performance and employee satisfaction.
- Recognizing and motivating employees: Developing both formal and informal recognition mechanisms could enhance staff motivation and reduce turnover in social assistance organizations.

##### e) Study Limitations

The study is limited by its small sample size and the specific nature of the organizations studied, which may restrict the generalizability of results to other contexts. Additionally, qualitative data may be influenced by participants' subjective perceptions, warranting caution in interpreting conclusions.

## **5. Solutions and Recommendations for Improving Performance Management in Social Assistance Services**

In light of the challenges discussed, adopting appropriate strategies could improve the efficiency and sustainability of performance management in social assistance organizations. Mayne, in *Best Practices in Results-based Management* (Mayne, 2007, pp. 65-78), proposes strategies centered on results-based management that can also be applied in the social assistance sector. One of Mayne’s key recommendations is involving employees in setting objectives and performance indicators through a participatory approach. This involvement motivates employees to achieve established objectives.

Mayne also emphasizes the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation systems that provide real-time feedback on progress. In social assistance organizations, this strategy can help identify and quickly address deficiencies, allowing constant adaptation of approaches. For example, by regularly monitoring performance, managers can detect training needs for staff directly interacting with beneficiaries. Such continuous adjustments can optimize resources and address issues affecting service quality.

For effective performance management implementation, Aguinis, in *Performance Management* (Aguinis, 2009, pp. 210-225), and Armstrong and Baron, in *Performance Management: Key Strategies and Practical Guidelines* (Armstrong et al., 2005, pp. 210-225), offer practical recommendations applicable to social assistance. Aguinis suggests developing a performance management framework that integrates both periodic evaluations and support for continuous professional development. This can include mentorship and training programs to help employees develop the competencies necessary to meet the challenges of social assistance.

Adopting a holistic approach emphasizes not only achieving objectives but also the quality of relationships and beneficiary satisfaction. This approach involves integrating organizational values into the performance evaluation system, ensuring employees not only meet administrative requirements but also act in line with the organization’s mission. Feedback methods should include beneficiary input to provide a complete picture of employee performance.

Developing a recognition and reward system tailored to the specificities of social assistance organizations is recommended. Recognition should not rely solely on financial rewards but also informal appreciation and opportunities for professional advancement. Such practices can boost staff motivation and reduce turnover, a common challenge in this sector.

Leadership must actively promote the importance of performance management by implementing these recommendations and supporting them. Clear communication of performance management objectives fosters an organizational environment where employees feel supported, valued, and appreciated. These recommendations support social assistance organizations in improving performance management and maximizing the positive impact of their activities on beneficiaries and the communities they serve.

## **6. Conclusions**

Performance management can play a decisive role in improving the quality and efficiency of social assistance services. Implementing such a system provides the necessary framework for continuously evaluating and improving individual and organizational performance, leading to better adaptation to the needs of the community and beneficiaries. In a field marked by limited resources and the complexity of interventions, performance management aids in efficiently allocating resources and identifying areas requiring additional support or adjustments.

Performance management also enables constant monitoring and flexible adaptation of approaches, promoting greater accountability and transparency in service delivery. Emphasizing continuous employee development contributes to creating a work environment that encourages both performance and professional satisfaction. In a challenging field, this approach has the potential to reduce staff turnover, increase stability, and improve relationships with beneficiaries.

In conclusion, performance management is not just a tool for evaluation but also a resource for increasing professionalism and accountability in social services. Proper implementation can uphold the ethical values of the field, contributing to building organizations that prioritize both beneficiary well-being and professional development for staff.

Despite significant challenges such as limited resources, the difficulty of measuring results in social contexts, and resistance to change, the potential benefits of an efficient performance management system are substantial. These include improved service quality and transparency, enhanced accountability, employee professional development, and optimized resource utilization.

Future research should focus on identifying new solutions to enhance the sustainability and flexibility of performance management, effectively adapting it to the realities and specific needs of social assistance organizations.

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