Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) Process

Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME)

From compliance checklist to change tool[1]

This case tracks user perspectives of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) process and utility. The MPAT is based on the notion that regulatory compliance should lead to improved management performance, and over time, improved service delivery outcomes. This case explores, in particular, the assumption that monitoring compliance with key regulatory requirements enables departments to identify management strengths and weaknesses and thereby to improve practice. This improved performance, it is hoped, will in time contribute to better service delivery outputs, outcomes and impacts. MPAT focuses on management practice: governance, strategy, finance and human resources, and uses an input-output model to monitor compliance. Departments must provide evidence of regulatory compliance and this is moderated.

The initial results suggest that there is organisational learning and improvement initiated by the MPAT process. The process of tracking compliance raises awareness about what should be done and what is not being done. This in itself enables proactive departments to make relevant adjustments to their management process. A positive orientation towards MPAT is under construction and its legitimacy has grown over the past year because of the 'high level political reflection' and the engagement on performance it appears to attract. This suggests that the MPAT process may in the long term lead to a growing understanding of the ways in which basic management systems and procedures contribute to and enhance department performance and service delivery. In addition, the learning process linked to MPAT, enables the identification of critical management processes that improve practice and performance. These include accountable leadership, monitoring, ensuring compliance and consequences.

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[1] This case was written for the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) by Salim Latib and Anne Mc Lennan from the Wits Graduate School of Public and Development Management (www.wits.ac.za/Academic/CLM/PDM/).

Introduction

> *We have a calendar which deals with all the compliance matters. It is also part of the reporting and checking to see if those deliverables have been made. MPAT helps with that. We realise that 'that damn department did work!' We always have a negative view [of departments]. It did enable us to identify gaps, for example, the fraud policy and highlight areas that needed improving. (Gauteng Department of Education)*

This case tracks user perspectives of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) process and utility. The Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in the Presidency works with partners to improve government performance by changing the way government works. In June 2010, Cabinet approved the roll-out of an institutional Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) to implement management performance assessment of department on an annual basis. The first MPAT (1.1) took place in 2011. This tool was adapted and the second MPAT (1.2) was rolled out in late 2012 and finalised in early 2013.

The MPAT is based on the notion that regulatory compliance should lead to improved management performance, and over time, improved service delivery outcomes. This case explores, in particular, the assumption that monitoring compliance with key regulatory requirements enables departments to identify management strengths and weaknesses and thereby to improve practice. This improved performance, it is hoped, will in time contribute to better service delivery outputs, outcomes and impacts. This management improvement model is represented in Figure 1. MPAT focuses on management practice: governance, strategy, finance and human resources, and uses an input-output model to monitor compliance. Departments must provide evidence of regulatory compliance and this is moderated.

The perspectives in this case are based on interviews with officials in selected national and provincial departments. The interviews were directed at building an understanding of the MPAT experience and the value it adds to departmental management and performance. The objective of the exercise was to build an understanding of what works or does not work to improve MPAT implementation in the future. The interviews sought to build a reflective understanding of the value, operation and efficacy of MPAT as a developmental tool for improving management performance. Officials interviewed ranged from those who were directly responsible for entering information on the MPAT system, to those who were responsible for championing the process within a Department or within provincial structures. In some cases, officials were only involved in the provision of information with no direct responsibility for MPAT or any form of engagements with the results emanating from the MPAT system.

Figure 1: MPAT process

As compliance checklist

The MPAT is a self-assessment tool which requires national and provincial departments to review their management compliance and rate their performance on a scale of 1 to 4. This is scale is provided in Figure 2. The primary purpose of the checklist is to enable departments to develop self-awareness about management process and requirements by working through various self-assessment processes. The departmental MPAT process flow is mapped in Resources.

The first step is for the department to use existing assessment tools (such Auditor General (AG) or Treasury reports) to partially complete the report card. Next is to carry out a comprehensive self-assessment with ratings and evidence. This should involve a process in departments which results in a bringing together of assessment and evidence and a sign off by senior management. This process seems to be more rigorously followed in departments that score 3s or 4s on compliance.

The resulting departmental discussion on the self-assessment results should lead to a discussion on the results with a view to improving practice in the following year. Where necessary, the department should put in place a plan to address areas of weakness. A department which scores at level four overall is a department that has excellent capability, is fully compliant and is performing above expectations. There is also evidence of benchmarking and learning. In such cases, good practice case studies will be developed and disseminated so that other departments have short cuts to improved practice.

Figure 2: MPAT assessment framework

Level	Description
Level 1	Department is non-compliant with legal/regulatory requirements
Level 2	Department is partially compliant with legal/regulatory requirements
Level 3	Department is fully compliant with legal/regulatory requirements
Level 4	Department is fully compliant with legal/regulatory requirements and is doing things smartly

The self-assessment and scores are clustered in four areas mapped in Figure 3. Each content area contains a number of questions which the department completes and provides evidence of achieving. These are uploaded onto the MPAT system and eventually moderated by trained moderators to cross check evidence and assessments. Scores are the adjusted by the moderation team and communicated to departments. Mostly scores are adjusted when there is insufficient evidence to validate the initial score. Departments are given an opportunity to engage on the changed scores and to provide the motivation for adjustment.

Figure 3: MPAT content areas

The MPAT team in the DPME are organised into management competency areas and seem to have developed collaborative working relationships with departments at provincial and national levels. They have a deep understanding of the MPAT process, the subject area, their own roles and the need to support departments in completing the tool. All observed engagements between the MPAT team and departments suggested that effective working relationships have been established. This seems to assist in the process of gathering and

moderating assessment and evidence and communicating results. This is an essential part of institutionalising MPAT on the annual calendar.

There is quite a lot of variation in processes MPAT in departments and how it is done. In the departments reviewed, there was pressure from senior management, usually Heads of Department (MPAT), in part arising from concerns with none-reporting in the past, or lower scores. In departments where there is a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) unit, the process is easily driven as it is a core element of the work of the relevant individuals. In National Treasury, MPAT was driven by an individual located in the Strategy Section within the Office of the Director General. In the Gauteng Department of Education, the planning team took responsibility and tied it into other reporting responsibilities.

In all cases reviewed, the pressure from above ensured that the departmental process was followed. Data was collected from across the department, collated by a responsible individual or team, reviewed by senior management, adjusted and then signed off by the Head of Department. Many interviewed expressed pride about getting all the data, and especially the evidence, uploaded on time. "*Requests were made via DDGs but we ask 'what are you scoring yourselves, can we help you to get a three?' Every SMS manager was aware but DDGs were accountable.*"

Given the senior level drive within institutions, cooperation at the operational level served to ensure that submissions were made and that people provide the necessary evidence. Given differential understandings of what is needed, the process raised queries about the value of some of the questions and the suitability of the evidence. Some people were worried about how the evidence might be interpreted and felt that more active interactions with DPME and moderators might ensure that scoring accurately reflects the reality within the Department.

> *... as the document will have an impact on how the Department is performing, before the document is finalised there needs to be some discussions on the scores. Can the custodians of the processes in the Department be interviewed...?*

Many of the departments noted the importance of having an effective data management system, not only to support MPAT but to assist in planning and meeting other compliance requests. Many departments have developed system for streamlining information requests and are also developing internal information management systems linked to planning processes and performance monitoring.

> *When you have the information, it is not a burden. The first round we couldn't produce proof. Now we streamline management and performance information. We had started before MPAT but MPAT helps. All documents have to go through the management process. There is a link between what you are doing and performance for assessment.*

The championing individuals were generally pleased with the training provided and were appreciative of the system and some of the limitations it embodied. As the individual championing the process in Treasury noted: "*We went for the training and it was really good. I played a coordination role...this was important as there was not much communication around MPAT.*" Having an internal champion often served to facilitate

dialogue with DPME and provided a basis for ensuring that people where not overwhelmed with the requirement of providing evidence to support responses to questions.

The capacity of these championing individuals is central to the extent of buy in from the wider Department, where there is active buy-in, the responsible person appears to work towards ensuring that there is wider appreciation of the system. This is reflected, for example on a thoughtful comment made on the value of the training provided by DPME by an official who noted that *"….what was really valuable is the presentation around the pockets of excellence. It was interesting to see how others go about it…you see the immediate places for improvement."*

It is interesting to note that even though individuals entering and providing information expressed some level of frustration with the online system, the comments are tempered by the reality of the support they received from the internal champions. Internal champions got involved in uploading information and ensuring that there is an understanding of the requirements. In many of the interviews, the champions expressed the importance of engaging with senior managers and others responsible for providing the information as a means for sustaining interest. Of particular importance was providing avenues for people to provide the evidence needed without necessarily requiring them to engage with the online system. As one of the champions noted, *"I made it easy for them to submit and they could send via email and then I just enter it onto the system and load the evidence."*

Further to the active role of champions within Departments it was generally noted that it was difficult to ensure active collective interactions on the results by Senior Managers, because of time limitations. However, in most cases there was direct interaction between the champion and the responsible managers. Generally, there were engagements on the results and people took them seriously as many recognised that they would feature in the reports submitted for Director General's approval.

> *It was difficult to get all the senior managers together to review the results, but they were given a chance to review and eventually it was submitted to the DG for his sign-off.*
> *There were contestations amongst Senior Managers on the scores….. In some cases it was because someone forgot to load a document.*

The role of the champion emerges as particularly significant for areas of work that do not necessarily easily fall within a coordinative support function areas, such as in the case of finance and human resources. In such instances, as in the case of Governance and Accountability, the responsibility falls with the overall Departmental champion. As was noted by an official, *"Governance and Accountability cannot be given to any specific person and then I just go to the relevant areas and collect the information and upload."*

The general perspective is that the momentum has increased from the first round, but more work needs to be done to ensure a wider appreciation of MPAT. Even as most comments from officials were encouraging and positive, there was expressed concern that the system is not widely known and that it has not been well positioned in the overall cycle of government wide planning and reporting. Some, like the Gauteng Department of

Education, have developed their own compliance calendar to manage the multiple requests. As some of the interviewed officials noted:

> *What is this and where do we fit in.*

> *Where does it fit in the cycle of government…surely all information needs to be consolidated…..perhaps it can feed into planning process so that we look at all together….its seems that MPAT is just another tool…*

> *We should ideally be assessed at the end of the financial year and not the middle.*

In addition to articulating the need for alignment with the planning process in Government, officials also raised issues around duplication and the fact that Treasury, DPSA and the Public Service Commission often ask for the same information. Some of the interviews went as far as to suggest that an integrated system is needed so as to avoid duplication in information provision.

> *Departments are complaining that they are giving the same evidence for different purposes… DPME should have access to information submitted to, for example DPSA, this will makes things much easier. This will really help Departments.*

> *We need role clarification between DPSA and MPAT. Do start with DPSA - HR - but DPSA does not do what it should - monitoring for the executive. But we are trying to align reports to eliminate the duplication in reporting. There should be an integration of reports.*

Many of the officials who interacted with the system claimed that it was often very complex and not user friendly. In the main, the challenges centred on the online entry of information and the general interpretation of evidence to be provided. Concerns around the system also incorporated challenges around the slowness of the system and the large volumes of information that needed to be uploaded. In many cases, the same documents needed to be uploaded for different areas evidence areas. As some official remarked:

> *The system functionality became a real issue towards the end. Linking evidence to the questions was a challenge…*

> *The system sometimes freezes and then you lose the information and have to start again…the size of document then it posed challenges for the internal auditors*

> *Most of the challenges relate to system issues…the system just when down and then there was a lag of a week…information just could not be loaded.*

Beyond the complexities embodied in the online system, officials also engaged on the challenges relating to understanding what is actually required. Some individuals found the system to be very complex and difficult to engage with.

> *It's an old system and not user friendly…they need to rethink the system to make it easy…its compliance oriented. They would have to rethink it… to search on the system is a mission, even just to go back.*

While the champions within the Departments assisted with interpreting what was needed there was still a sense that the language and related issues of how requirements are

interpreted require further guidance. As an official from the Department of Science and Technology puts it

> *…I congratulate them, they have come up with a good idea, but it just needs refinement…the English language needs to be refined here and there…there needs to be a common understanding of the meaning of the language used.*

Whilst not a common thread, some officials complained about not having enough guidance on precisely what was required as evidence and what different terms mean within the process. Comments centred on language used or the substance of what is required.

> *…it wasn't that easy …some of the things where difficult to understand…the diversity issues, I was not sure what it was referring to, was it the employment equity or something else.*

Some interview respondents were of the view that they were being judged on matters that were either outside of the scope of their control or were not reflective of their work as a Department.

> *Some of the things are not in our hands and we are judged on them (for example HoD assessment)*
>
> *We should not be judged on matters that are beyond our control.*

As a change tool

The interviews suggest that there is a link between reviewing compliance and the possibility of making changes to management processes. The process of assessing and documenting management compliance highlight areas of excellence in departments and more importantly gaps. Many interviewed suggested that they had introduced various management systems because MPAT had shown that these were absent or incomplete. The pressure to report and to perform also encourages departments to develop better information management strategies and reporting systems and to focus on performance with the department. This seems to lead towards a *'performance culture'*.

There appears to be wider appreciation of MPAT as a more integrative management assessment tool, separate of what is required, from a reporting perspective, to what is needed by National Treasury (NT) and the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). However, many indicated that the energy around MPAT largely unfolded as a result of the initial results presented and the fact that these featured in discussions within senior level administrative and structures of government. Departments were not happy that they faced criticism for non-compliance when it comes to the failure to submit information on MPAT or for not achieving higher scores. As a Treasury Official outlined:

> *In the first round, national treasury did not submit and everyone was named and shamed in Cabinet and the Director-General was mortified. This year it was seen as a priority because we don't want to be named and shamed.*

Even though there are claims that MPAT is not known, the general view seems to be that it has become a matter of increased dialogue because the results are presented in

Cabinet and within relevant provincial structures. The importance of responding to the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) has been established because reports feature in higher level structures and Heads of Department and Members of the Executive are challenged on scores or non-compliance. *"I should be more on board as much as I should as I want to avoid an embarrassment if compliance asks and I don't know."*

MPAT is increasingly perceived as an assessment tool that will and should feature in, for example, the performance of structures and individuals, even though it has been positioned as a developmental tool and a framework for encouraging reflection on compliance, on management practices and improvements needed, it. A National Treasury Official remarked that *"…in future the scores could be linked to the performance of individuals…it could be linked…in the past it was never discussed in strategic planning…"* It was noted by some that the process was taken even more seriously because of the scoring. An official indicated that *"Managers take it very seriously, especially when you start introducing scores. Everybody came to the party and all gave direct feedback."*

Beyond mild protestations on the lack of popular information on MPAT, much of the drive towards ensuring submissions are made and dialogue unfolds on the scores registered on MPAT are driven by the reality that the scores feature in dialogue outside of the Department. As an official from the Department of Science and Technology pointed out, in relation to the published scores, *"… any bad communication that goes out is a reflection on the Department"*. There is growing desire amongst Department to engage with scores and push these higher as the general perception is that these would eventually feature as important when it comes to the provision of performance bonuses and would also serve to legitimate internal performance related actions within Departments. This is likely to place pressure on DPME to clearly establish the linkages between MPAT scores and related performance assessments of individuals and Heads of Department.

The general perspective is that the tool has value in that it assists with reflection on internal management practices and does serve to highlight compliance and performance challenges.

> *Some of the things were just so interesting… even the private sector does not meet those criteria…for example, filling vacant post in three months. I like to see a Department that does that.*
>
> *It brought out some issues…in some instances national Treasury prescribes, but did not notice that it was also not complying with the framework….it was highlighted from the feedback.*

Of particular significance is that MPAT contributes directly to internal dialogue between DGs and Senior Officials at the time when the DG has to sign off on the submission. In many cases DGs notice areas that they were not attending to fully.

> *The DG has queries some of the scores…in future the scores could be linked to the performance of individuals…it could be linked…in the past it was never discussed in strategic planning…*

> *You see some gaps and areas that can be improved…. Some areas where highlighted to the DG and he noticed that some areas that require his signature…we were not complying.*

There are numerous concerns expressed around its utility as a performance tracking system. In the main the issues centre around the need for further engagement and follow-up on submitted information. For example, an official remarks that the system is primarily about compliance and not about change: "*Some of the issues, for example Head of Department assessments, we need to ask what the impact is or is this just about compliance.*"

Strongly linked to the issue of the value of the assessment are contestations around the engagement and feedback process on the results and submitted data. This ranges from perceptions that information is sometimes not considered in the final scoring process: "*…we sometimes submit information that is not taken into consideration.*" Officials were particularly interested in opportunities for more in-depth engagements on the scores.

> *…the challenge is with the people that interpret the information, if you make a decision without coming back to me that would be wrong as you may not understand the information.*
>
> *…there needs to be more active interactions so that the moderation is understood and also the evidence provided is engaged with.*
>
> *…the coordinators are not able to speak to the documentation that is brought as evidence to them.*
>
> *as the document will have an impact on how the Department is performing, before the document is finalised there needs to be some discussions on the scores. Can the custodians of the processes in the Department be interviewed…?*
>
> *…the challenge is with the people that interpret the information, if you make a decision without coming back to me that would be wrong as you may not understand the information.*

At a more substantive level, individuals were particularly eager to engage in wider interactions around their performance, including building an understanding of how they had performed in a particular area, relative to other Departments:

> *…it would be good to see all of the results, so that at the end of the day we can assess where to we stand as HR relative to other Departments…*

There was generally an eagerness to engage in reflection on other Department experiences and how these could inform improvements. Many of the interviewed officials were not aware of the documented experiences from other departments and have expressed an eagerness for other documented stories of improvement.

> *…we do look at areas that were not too good, like an MPAT score of one(1) and then ask why this was the case and how it can be changed and to understand the root cause of it.*
>
> *..Learning is a two way stream, so we would want to learn from what others are doing. We are doing this for the public good and not because we are competing…so we can learn from others.*

I would like to look at the case studies and then go back to areas that we did not do so well and then show the pockets' of excellence…and show how they when about doing it…

We need the pocket of excellence to be accessible…can we reach out to the other Departments…

Some of the things were just so interesting… even the private sector does not meet those criteria…for example, filling vacant post in three months. I like to see a Department that does that.

In the context of reflections on the value-add of MPAT, there were a number of officials who emphasised the importance of articulating the developmental aspects of MPAT. The general perspective was that, although MPAT is positioned for improvement, DPME has not articulated developmental elements that can be incorporated for the future.

MPAT is a developmental tool…but the question is DPME going to be involved in the developmental aspect for follow-up…not just it being an assessment tool and just a yearly exercise….where is the developmental aspect…"

"Sometimes things are done verbally, but are not documented as required…and hence cannot be validated…there was lot of contestation on draft versus final version….this makes a difference between two to three"

Conclusion

The initial results suggest that there is organisational learning and improvement initiated by the MPAT process. The process of tracking compliance raises awareness about what should be done and what is not being done. This in itself enables proactive departments to make relevant adjustments to their management process. This suggests that the underlying assumption that checking compliance can facilitate management improvement seems to hold.

While system is directed at enhancing internal reflection on management performance and directed at performance enhancements, the general orientation is that it may be used to judge department and hence is relevant and valid as a performance tool. In addition to challenges relating to being judged on compliance issues that are beyond the direct control of the Department, officials were also worried that the standard framework does not capture the particularities of differently oriented and situated Departments. For example, one official commented that *"…a centre of Government department is different to others and some of the issues around service delivery might not apply…."*

The general positive orientation towards MPAT is under construction and its legitimacy has grown over the past year because of the 'high level political reflection' and engagement on performance it appears to attract. This high level commitment was particularly important in the context of resistance from officials, as noted by one official, *"…there was initially some resistance ……why another tool and why can't all be consolidated… the second time around there was some cynicism, but people were not given a choice…it was not a debate…I did not experience much push back…people did not want to be singled out as not submitting."*

Postscript

The 2013 learning case story process has resulted in the documentation of 10 good practices. The approach used to develop the cases kept in mind the purpose of promoting the application of good management practices in the Public Service through the sharing of relevant and peer reviewed stories. A combination of process reflection and narrative enquiry was used to collect the data combined process reflection with narrative enquiry.

Process reflection documents and analyses the development of a practice. It focuses on what services were provided to whom and how. Its purpose is to describe how the process unfolded - who was involved and what problems were experienced. This is done through a combination of documentary analysis (of all the evidence provided to MPAT) and individual and focus group interviews. Narrative enquiry examines experiences as expressed in told stories. It allows complex experiences to be repackaged as learning stories.

As part of the 2013 good practice case process, a peer review workshop was held on 24 June 2013 to quality assure the cases and also to identify key learning. The following key issues we identified for further learning and exploration:

- Engaging with the people who do the routine compliance work is valuable in terms of identifying strategies to improve implementation. This led to a suggestion to establish communities of practitioners in each of the MPAT areas that would serve as a knowledge hub, review regulations and identify new challenges.
- The cases mean that departments don't have to start from scratch. They can learn from the challenges reflected and adapt the message and the process to their own departmental needs and mandates. Identifying champions for processes might be useful in this regard.
- Many perceive excellent work as 'just doing our jobs'. This suggests that compliance to basic management standards is an important stepping stone to improving performance and contributing to service delivery.
- Management and leadership stability are a key factor in setting up systems, monitoring and sustaining compliance. In particular, managers need to be prepared to deal effectively with non-compliance and work at building a performance culture.
- Internal monitoring systems are essential components of compliance. This means departments are more effective when they have information management systems and all relevant staff are aware of what is going on.
- People are the most important part of the delivery process and successful departments recognise and reward good performance, support and enable learning, communicate and take time to institutionalise and routinize processes. These departments trust staff to deliver, ask them to participate and expect them to take responsibility for doing their work well.

Overall, participants at the workshop requested DPME to ensure that the case stories enabled further learning and to establish a mechanism to share experiences and knowledge that emerge from the MPAT process. Good news stories must be visible.

Appendix 1: MPAT Process

Department Self Assessment using the MPAT Tool

MPAT Coordinator	KPA Manager	Internal Audit Activity (IAA)	Senior Management	Director General

1 Notify KPA managers to perform self assessment

2 Complete self assessment, attach evidence and submit to senior management

3 Review self assessment in preparation of meeting

4 Arrange senior management meeting for group discussion of MPAT Self assessment

6 Modify ratings, comments and add evidence as per agreement in meeting

5 Attend meeting and provide guidance on request

5 Evaluate self assessment at meeting and agree on changes

7 Submit updated self assessment to Internal Audit

8 Review evidence to verify existence

Agree with IAA? — Yes / No

Evidence adequate? — Yes / No

11 Modify ratings and comments per IAA comments

9a Complete the IAA Comments field with "Verified existence of evidence" per statement

12 Submit to MPAT coordinator for repeat of cycle

9b Complete the IAA Comments field with "Do not verify existence of evidence" per statement. Provide reasons for the disagreement in the same comments field.

13 Request a discussion with IAA

14 Attach additional evidence (if available)

10 Submit to MPAT Coordinator and KPA Managers

15 Conduct meeting with IAA

Evidence verified? — No / Yes

17 Submit to MPAT Coordinator and to the DG with both management and IAA comments

16 Change comment to "Verified existence of evidence"

18 Review scores and comments

New evidence? — Yes / No

Agreement? — No

20 Request further discussion with IAA and provide / attach additional evidence

22 Review (new) evidence

19 Request that the parties meet again to reach consensus

21 Consider to adjust scores and comments and submit to IAA

Adequate? — Yes / No

23 Change comment to "Verified existence of evidence"

26 Final review and tick the approval statement

24 Tick the verification statement

25 Submit to DG

27 Submit to DPME

MPAT Tool