Motivating Employees in a New Governance Era: The Performance Paradigm Revisited

What lessons does prior research on employee motivation offer public managers operating in—and researchers studying the dynamics of—a new governance era of results-based, downsized, networked, and customer-focused public organizations? In this essay, we summarize what the voluminous body of social and behavioral science research tells us about motivating human performance in public, private, and nonprofit organizations. Informing this analysis is a “review of reviews” of a sprawling research base that examines four elements of the traditional performance paradigm: employee incentives, job design, employee participation, and goal setting (Locke et al. 1980). From this formidable body of research, we discern what is known about employee motivation, what is left to know, and how useful the classic performance paradigm is in light of these new governance challenges.

We conducted our literature review by searching all appropriate and available databases using a variety of key terms (this search is chronicled more extensively in the online version of this essay). It suffices to note that the present analysis focuses on 62 articles reviewing the impact of the four elements of the traditional paradigm on employee performance. The reviews examined include 17 narrative reviews, 15 research syntheses, and 30 meta-analyses of prior research on motivation in public, private, and nonprofit organizations. Collectively, the reviews examine at least 2,612 research articles. We cast our net widely because the diversity of organizational forms and structures in the public sector make it increasingly difficult to dismiss any intervention as “outside” a transformed and still evolving public sector. At the same time, however, we were conscious of whether the findings specifically applied to the public sector, why or why not, and in what respect.

What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?

For the reader’s convenience, figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model that underlies our review and analysis. We initially defined the model exclusively in terms of motivational factors and programs leading to specific behavioral outcomes. Factors identified during the course of our analysis were added as mediating (i.e., intervening to affect the impact of motivational tools on behavior) and moderating (i.e., affecting the impact of the mediating) components of the model. From the research informing this model, we identified 13 broad propositions for practitioners to ponder and for researchers to test and further refine regarding the impact of financial incentives, job design, participation, and goal setting on employee and organizational performance in the contemporary administrative state.

Financial Incentives

What is the logic of financial incentives, and what impact do they have on employee motivation? The use of monetary or other financial incentives in the classic performance paradigm is based primarily on the theoretical propositions of reinforcement theory. Reinforcement theory focuses on the relationship between the target behavior (e.g., performance) and a motivational tool (e.g., pay for performance) (Skinner 1969), and it is premised on the principles and techniques of organizational behavior modification (Luthans 1973; Stajkovic and Luthans 1997). Organizational behavior modification is a framework within which employee behaviors are identified, measured, and analyzed in terms of their functional consequences (i.e., existing reinforcements) and an intervention is developed using principles of reinforcement (Luthans and Kreitner 1975; Stajkovic and Luthans 1997). Our review of the literature focused on organizations’ use of financial incentives to increase both individual and group performance and productivity. These types of monetary incentives include individual and small-group rewards, as well as profit-sharing and gain-sharing incentive plans. Seventeen review articles, among them three meta-analyses and nine research syntheses, informed our analysis in this instance. The reviews examine these types of financial incentive systems or address merit pay, pay-for-performance, variable pay, and compensation, and race and gender issues focused on civic engagement, volunteer compensation, and job performance. The reviews were conscious of whether the findings specifically applied to the public sector, why or why not, and in what respect.

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Theory to Practice

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or group bonus plans. From this analysis, we culled three general propositions that are suitable for informing practice and theory building.

**Proposition 1:** Financial incentives improve task performance moderately to significantly, but their effectiveness is dependent on organizational conditions. Two recent reviews of the effects of organizational behavior modification indicate that monetary incentives significantly improve task performance. Stajkovic and Luthans's (2003) meta-analysis of 72 field studies shows that an organizational behavior modification intervention using monetary incentives improved task performance by 23 percent, whereas an intervention with social recognition did so by only 17 percent and feedback by only 10 percent. Furthermore, by combining all three types of motivational reinforcers, performance improved by 45 percent. This is a stronger effect on performance than when each approach was applied separately. Feedback combined with money and social recognition produced the strongest effect on performance.

A second meta-analysis by the same authors focuses only on manufacturing and service organizations, finding that performance improvements are generally larger for interventions introduced in manufacturing settings than those introduced in service organizations. Interestingly, these authors find that a combination of financial, nonfinancial, and social rewards produces the strongest effect in manufacturing organizations. Yet for service organizations, financial reinforcers produce a stronger effect on task performance than nonfinancial rewards.

Several reviews focus on individual monetary incentives (e.g., Bucklin and Dickinson 2001; Jenkins et al. 1998; Tolchinsky and King 1980). In general, these reviews also indicate that individual monetary incentives improve performance, but not under all conditions. Bucklin and Dickinson's (2001) review of different types of pay arrangements finds, for example, that individual monetary incentives plus feedback improve performance significantly more than hourly pay plus feedback. The most critical determinant of performance is the use of a ratio schedule, whereby individuals earn a specified amount of money for the number of work units completed. However, these studies focus primarily on college students and include only studies using an experimental design.

Again focusing primarily on college students, Jenkins et al.'s (1998) meta-analysis of 39 studies addresses performance quantity and quality, finding that financial incentives are significantly related to performance quantity but not to quality. In this review, the type of setting moderates the financial incentive–performance relationship. However, the type of task is not related to the strength or relationship between financial incentives and performance quantity. In contrast, Tolchinsky and King’s (1980) review specifically examines the role of goals as mediators of the
performance—monetary incentive linkage. These authors find that although monetary incentives influence performance, the relationship is not mediated by goal setting. That is, goal setting and monetary incentives influence performance independently. Further discussion of goal setting appears later in this essay.

Relatedly, much has been written on merit pay or pay-for-performance systems. PAR readers looking for comprehensive discussions of the circumstances in which merit pay plans produce positive effects on individual job performance should consult Robert Heneman’s Merit Pay (1992) and the National Research Council’s Pay for Performance (Milkovich and Wigdor 1991). These reviews include the public and private sectors and discuss the institutional arrangements and other situational characteristics that moderate the pay-for-performance relationship. Generally, they conclude that merit pay plans can result in positive outcomes—particularly in terms of individual job performance (Milkovich and Wigdor 1991). Again, however, differences in institutional arrangements contribute to the feasibility and effectiveness of merit pay. So, too, do differences exist in employees’ preferences for merit pay. Heneman (1992), however, concludes that merit pay is at best moderately effective. He finds that it is consistently related to positive attitudes (albeit with one major exception—the federal government) but that pay is only inconsistently linked to improved performance.

Proposition 2: Individual financial incentives are ineffective in traditional public sector settings.

Reviews that include the public sector (e.g., Ingraham 1993; Kellough and Lu 1993; Perry 1988) appear to be at odds with the findings of reviews that examine financial incentives in the private sector or in laboratory settings using college students. In general, these reviews suggest that merit pay and pay-for-performance systems in the public sector have generally been unsuccessful, have little positive impact on employee motivation and organizational performance, and fail to show a significant relationship between pay and performance. These reviews, however, note that the failure to find a significant pay–performance relationship is likely the result of a lack of adequate funding for merit pay and an absence of the organizational and managerial characteristics that are necessary to make pay for performance work in traditional government settings.

Proposition 3: Group incentive systems are consistently effective, but they are not well tested in public sector settings, where measures of organizational performance often are uncertain. Team-based or small-group incentives are characterized as rewards in which a portion of individual pay is contingent on measurable group performance (DeMatteo, Eby, and Sundstrom 1998). In general, the conditions under which team rewards are effective are unclear, especially because experimental laboratory studies appear to be more supportive than field studies. Effectiveness depends on the characteristics of the reward system, the organization, the team, and individual team members (DeMatteo, Eby, and Sundstrom 1998). Honeywell-Johnson and Dickinson (1999) do find that equally divided small-group incentives sustain high levels of productivity and satisfaction for group members and that small-group incentives are at least as effective as individual incentives with groups of 2 to 12. However, their review again consists primarily of experimental studies using college students.

Conversely, reviews of alternative pay systems, such as profit-sharing or gainsharing plans, are remarkably consistent in their findings. These incentive programs include various pay-for-performance approaches that link employees’ financial rewards to improvements in the performance of the work unit (Welbourne and Gomez Mejia 1995). In general, prior research indicates that these types of incentive systems are associated in practice, as well as in employers’ and employees’ minds, with both higher productivity and improvements in organizational performance. Yet even though these findings generalize across qualitative, quantitative, and survey research studies, they are focused exclusively on private sector settings.

Job Design

Paul Light’s (1999) survey of five cohorts of MPA graduates reveals that a common concern of respondents is “show me the work,” a motivational refrain underlying the logic of all job design initiatives. Job design has its modern roots in Frederick Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation (namely, hygiene and motivator factors) and his guidance for enriching jobs (and hence performance) by incorporating “satisfiers” that are linked to personal growth into work settings (Herzberg, Mausner, Snyderman 1959). These include jobs designed to afford a sense of challenge or accomplishment. Recently, most work design attention has centered on Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) job characteristics model. They posit that jobs rich in motivating characteristics (e.g., task significance) stimulate psychological states (e.g., experienced meaningfulness of work) among job incumbents that, in turn, increase the likelihood of desired personal and work outcomes. For example, the significance of a task can trigger a sense of meaningfulness of work in employees that leads to better performance.

To discern what prior research tells us about the validity of such claims, we analyzed 16 reviews that include 10 meta-analyses, 4 research syntheses, and 2 narrative reviews. These reviews focus on two motivational techniques of interest to public managers and researchers: job redesign and alternative work schedules. The motivational logic underlying the two techniques...
is that they can positively affect employees’ autonomy—one of five critical job characteristics identified by Hackman and Oldham (1980)—and, in turn, improve personal and work outcomes. The reviews vary in their attention to sector, with about a third of the job design reviews intentionally addressing this topic. All three of the reviews of the impact of alternative work schedules consider sector, and one of the reviews focuses exclusively on the public sector (Golembiewski and Proehl 1980). From these, however, three propositions are readily discernible.

**Proposition 4: Job design is an effective strategy that enhances performance.** Job design and alternative work schedules appear to be effective strategies for improving performance. Most reviews do not isolate the size of the overall effect of job redesign, but one review finds a median impact of 6.4 percent on improved productivity and 28 percent on work quality. Moreover, and significantly, the effects of job redesign persist across outcomes. Job redesign has been found to reduce turnover and absenteeism as well as increase job satisfaction, organizational commitment, productivity, and work quality.

**Proposition 5: Job design interventions influence affective outcomes more strongly than behavioral outcomes.** Many reviews of motivational research conclude that job redesign may be more influential for affective outcomes (i.e., attitudes toward work) than for behavioral outcomes. Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) job characteristics model posits a causal chain between job design and work outcomes: Job characteristics lead to psychological states, which, in turn, produce personal and work outcomes. In a finding corroborated by several reviews, Griffin and his collaborators conclude in an early review of job design research that “the task design/performance relationship has not been as consistently demonstrated as have task design/affective response relationships” (1981, 655). Why might this be the case? Some analysts suggest that performance or behavioral outcomes may be attenuated by moderators (such as those listed in figure 1) that influence the chain of causation between affective and performance outcomes (Brown 1996; Fried and Ferris 1987; Kelly 1992). Another common explanation is that performance is more difficult to measure and more variable across contexts than affective outcomes.

**Proposition 6: Moderators and implementation are important influences on the efficacy of job design.** As figure 1 illustrates, Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) original formulation of job characteristics theory argues that the outcomes of job redesign are influenced by several moderators. These are factors that influence the relationships between motivational initiatives and employee work and between motivational initiatives and work outcomes. Notable among these moderators are differences in the degree to which individuals or employees desire personal or psychological development. Although only a limited number of reviews has addressed the significance of moderators, three reviews look explicitly at them and find them to be critical influences on the work design–performance relationship (Berlinger, Glick, and Rodgers 1988; Fried and Ferris 1987; Spector 1986). For example, the most prominent moderator of the effects of job design listed in figure 1—the strength of an employee’s higher-order or growth needs—can reinforce or diminish changes in variables related to mediating psychological states that, in turn, affect behavioral outcomes. Prior research on job design does not underscore the importance of avoiding known implementation pitfalls. All assert that successful job redesign requires a rigorous process in which implementers identify the type of problem, assess the efficacy of manipulating job characteristics to mitigate the problem, and ascertain the context to ensure that threats to success are not present.

**Participation**

How effective is employee participation in motivating improved performance and organizational outcomes? The classic performance paradigm uses many terms to describe employee participation in the workplace, such as employee involvement, participative management, and employee empowerment. In a narrow sense, employee participation is “joint decision making or influence sharing between employees and managers” (Doucouliagos 1995, 60). More broadly, participation is “a conscious and intended effort by individuals at a higher level in an organization to provide visible extra-role or role-expanding opportunities for individuals or groups at a lower level in the organization to have a greater voice in one or more areas of organizational performance” (Glew et al. 1995, 402). Despite strong professional interest and theoretical support for participative systems, a review of eight meta-analyses and four narrative reviews and syntheses suggests that participation has positive effects on affective attachments to the organization but only small positive effects on performance.

**Proposition 7: Participation has a strong positive impact on employees’ affective reactions to the organization.** Our review of reviews finds that participation, broadly defined, generally leads to higher satisfaction with organizational processes and decisions and, ultimately, to stronger commitment to the organization. Spector (1986) summarizes that employees who perceive more control at work are more satisfied, more motivated, and more committed to the organization. Shared decision making may improve employees’ satisfaction with both decisions made and the process by which such decisions are made, thus strengthening employees’ commitment to decisions, as well as their sense of justice in the process (Cawley,
researchers have moved beyond motivational measures to encourage employees who have intimate knowledge of their jobs to be more involved in improving decision quality. However, few have considered the requirements of their jobs to be more involved in decision making and the perceptions of improvement in decision quality.

**Proposition 8: Participation has a positive but limited impact on employee performance.** Although participation seems to affect employees’ attitudes positively, the link to performance is less clear. Wagner’s (1994) meta-analysis of participation research, for example, concludes that participation has positive but limited effects on employee performance. Yet public managers and researchers should expect decision processes that provide limited opportunities for employee involvement, that are restricted to specific processes, or that are limited in duration to have even more limited results on performance (Ledford and Lawler 1994). Locke and Schweiger (1979) note that numerous contextual factors influence the relationship between participation and performance. Other organization-level factors that may have a negative influence on this relationship include organization size, task complexity, the quality of existing working relationships, and leadership skills. Individual moderating factors that can negatively influence the impact of participation include low employee support for the participation process, low employee knowledge and experience on the job, and low general levels of employee motivation. Unfortunately, researchers have not been able to explore these contextual factors systematically across empirical studies. In addition, organizations usually introduce participation interventions simultaneously with other interventions, such as reward systems, goal setting, performance feedback, and job design (Ledford and Lawler 1994). This makes it difficult to isolate the impact of participation on performance.

**Proposition 9: The promise of participation may lie in improved decision making.** Although many studies of participation focus on the affective and performance outcomes of shared decision making, our analysis of the research suggests that the greatest organizational gains from employee participation may come from producing better decisions. In particular, participation may improve the information and knowledge sharing necessary for high-quality decision making. In the process, individuals who might not normally share information may do so, including employees at various levels in the hierarchy (Wagner et al. 1997). Participation also can be structured to encourage employees who have intimate knowledge of the requirements of their jobs to be more involved in making decisions, leading to higher decision quality and more creative responses. However, few researchers have moved beyond motivational measures of performance to pay close attention to the value of information sharing in the workplace (Locke and Schweiger 1979).

**Goal Setting**

With public and nonprofit managers pressed to clarify organizational goals and measure results, what lessons can practitioners and researchers draw from research on the relationship between goal setting and performance? Goal-setting theory posits that conscious and well-specified goals—defined as the object or aim of an action to attain a particular standard of performance—positively affect the actions of employees. Moreover, after nearly 40 years of research, which has produced more than 1,000 articles and reviews, goal-setting theory is the single most researched and dominant theory of employee motivation in the field (Mitchell and Daniels 2003). In the process, researchers have applied goal-setting theory to studies of more than 40,000 participants’ performance on well over 100 different tasks in eight countries in both laboratory and field settings (Locke and Latham 2002). From all this, we can derive four propositions that practitioners can weigh and researchers can test, elaborate, and refine in future research.

**Proposition 10: Challenging and specific goals improve the performance of employees.** A review of 11 meta-analyses and 6 narrative reviews of goal-setting research suggests that goal setting does increase individual, group, and work unit performance. Early goal-setting research provided strong support for the belief that specific and challenging goals are associated with higher levels of performance, more so than either no goals or general “do your best goals” (Mento, Steel, and Karren 1987). In contrast, that body of research also suggested that narrow goals and multiple or potentially conflicting goals might decrease performance. More recently, Locke and Latham (1990) have proposed an integrated model of work motivation and satisfaction in which challenging and specific goals lead to high performance, which, in turn, leads to increased rewards, greater satisfaction, and, ultimately, a stronger commitment to the organization. Again, however, research suggests that the relationships between goal setting and measures of performance are moderated by many contextual factors, including task structure and employee characteristics.

Additional research is now emerging on the impact of goal setting on higher levels of performance, such as creativity (Egan 2005), and on elements of organizational citizenship behavior (Ambrose and Kulik 1999). For example, Shalley (1991) finds that participants with a do-your-best or difficult goal, as well as a goal for creativity, are more likely to exhibit high levels of productivity and creativity, whereas employees with only a productivity goal are less creative.
Proposition 11: Setting learning goals, as opposed to merely difficult-to-attain goals, may be most effective when tasks are complex. If challenging goals can stimulate high performance, the research suggests that the complexity that some goals bring can afford motivational challenges as well. Indeed, task complexity, the interdependent and dynamic nature of tasks, can have profound implications for the goal–performance relationship. When tasks are complex, setting difficult goals may lead to decreased performance, whereas setting do-your-best goals or goals that encourage employees to explore strategies to tackle the task may improve performance (Locke and Latham 2002). The knowledge and experience of the employee, as well as the strategies required to complete the task at hand, influence the goal–performance relationship. These caveats notwithstanding, our review of reviews confirms that goals appear to provide an important mechanism for stimulating employees to develop plans to attain desired ends. In situations in which public employees find themselves tackling complex issues, the establishment of learning goals may not only enhance employee mastery of the task but also create an atmosphere that is conducive to continual problem solving and knowledge acquisition within the organization.

Proposition 12: The goal–performance relationship is strongest when employees are committed to their goals and receive incentives (monetary or otherwise), input, and feedback related to the achievement of goals. Our review also suggests, however, that managers and researchers can expect challenging or difficult goals to be especially performance enhancing when committed employees give input, receive feedback, and perceive incentives for achieving them (Ambrose and Kulik 1999; Klein et al. 1999). Although participation in goal setting may not directly influence performance, participation may indirectly influence commitment to goals and encourage employees to set more difficult goals, both of which ultimately lead to higher performance.

In turn, though our review of the literature suggests that external rewards are not always required to strengthen the relationship between goals and productivity, the presence of rewards may enhance employees’ perceptions of the importance of the goals and, ultimately, improve their commitment to them (Wright 2001). To be sure, Ambrose and Kulik (1999) report that individuals with high levels of self-efficacy (i.e., those with greater confidence in their own abilities) typically set high personal goals and achieve high levels of performance without external prods. In addition, people with high self-efficacy are more committed to assigned goals, find better task strategies to attain them, and respond more positively to negative feedback than do people with low self-efficacy. However, as individuals learn their jobs, self-efficacy may be less important than the motivating and energizing influence of challenging personal goals.

Thus, as always, managers can profit by taking the time to understand their subordinates before employing one-size-fits-all prescriptions for motivation. Yet they can also benefit from not assuming that feelings of efficacy among their employees are beyond their control. In concluding their meta-analysis, for example, Wofford, Goodwin, and Premack (1992) suggest that managers who want to ensure that challenging goals are set and met should try to improve employees’ abilities to carry out goals, as well as their knowledge of the results their efforts are producing. To increase employees’ commitment to their goals, managers should build employees’ self-confidence by ensuring that the task is difficult but not too complex. According to Wofford, Goodwin, and Premack, “If workers can begin with tasks that they can [achieve] and then progressively be given more challenging tasks so that their performance remains positive, they may be expected to set high-level personal goals. If managers are to encourage participation in goal setting, then it is important that employees already be highly engaged in work place decision making” (1992, 612).

Proposition 13: Goal setting may face unique challenges in the public sector. The research suggests that goal-setting theories are appropriate for public managers operating in diverse settings with complex situations and in settings in which tasks are routine and simple. Applying them, however, is not without its own peculiar challenges. Wright (2001) suggests, for example, that although goal-setting theory may be an important organizing framework for public sector motivation (Perry and Wise 1990), it is a very complex framework. Moreover, the strong influence of such individual-level factors as self-efficacy, job experience, and the desire for performance feedback may make successful implementation of goal-setting plans difficult. In addition, Wright (2001) notes that two unique qualities of public sector employment may reduce the influence of goal setting on public employees’ performance. First, public employees’ perceptions of a weak link between performance and financial rewards may diminish the incentives that are available to public sector managers to make organizational goals important to employees. Second, procedural constraints in the public sector may lower employees’ perceptions of their ability to achieve their goals. These points, however, remain speculative. To date, limited application of goal-setting theory exists in empirical research on employee motivation in public settings.

Conclusions
Though the online version of this article includes greater detail and a robust research agenda that is premised on the literature review presented here, we want to conclude by highlighting four general
observations. First, our analysis indicates that we know more about human performance than we historically have recognized, especially because the research has relied on limited scrutiny of the literature (e.g., Behn 1995). Still, we must understand that intervening to change human performance will always be an uncertain and indeterminate process. Moreover, although the language of much of the literature and research on programs such as merit pay, management by objectives, and job design is individually oriented, our review suggests that an understanding of individual human behavior is an important building block for thinking more expansively about the design and management of public sector systems. Not only do our findings reinforce Rainey and Steinbauer’s (1999) analysis, which posits three types of motivation—public-service motivation, mission motivation, and task motivation—as the immediate antecedents of agency effectiveness, they reveal many connections across levels of analyses.

Second, we are cautiously optimistic that the generalizations about motivation derived from our review of reviews can be applied in a transformed public sector. Importantly, the increasing diversity of organizational and structural forms in the public sector brings a variety of motivational tools that have long been identified with the private sector into play for a transformed public sector. What is more, our review indicates that the social science theories underlying traditional motivational programs are sufficiently robust to be used as heuristics for designing new programs for a transformed public sector.

Third—and the first two points notwithstanding—we still have much to learn about motivating human performance. Moreover, some of the gaps in our knowledge are particularly relevant to the changing public sector. Regardless of whether they are applied in old or new governance settings, we believe the field must immediately answer one question: To what extent are managers and organizations pursuing interventions grounded in good theory and research? Equally deficient is our knowledge about group financial incentives and our understanding of the contextual factors that influence participation and other forms of intervention.

Finally, we want to appeal to public managers and scholars. Professionals in public organizations can contribute significantly to the expansion of our knowledge about performance in public organizations by (1) being more transparent, (2) partnering with researchers to assess organizational interventions, and (3) engaging in more experiments to determine what works. Admittedly, this will be difficult for many public organizations and administrators whose agendas are driven by and must answer to political leadership. By the same token, public leaders, political and nonpolitical, can enhance the credibility of their actions and improve performance across the public sector by taking steps to increase learning about the choices they make.

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Notes
1. We use the term employee motivation with one caveat: In this new governance era, public managers must be attentive to the motivation of both employees and, in some circumstances, nonemployees who are involved in implementation networks or other structural arrangements. Although we use the term employee motivation, we intend the label to apply to both employees and nonemployees who are agents of public action.
2. Narrative reviews are thematic reviews that assess a body of literature but lack transparency in the way evidence is identified and collected. Research syntheses are systematic searches and analyses of literature that rely on qualitative methods. Meta-analyses are reviews that statistically combine results across studies.
3. We added together the number of studies identified in each article. Narrative reviews typically do not identify the number of articles reviewed, so the total is likely larger than 2,612. This undercounting is offset, however, by probable overlap in empirical studies included in reviews.
4. Any model of organizational performance must take into account other factors in creating a comprehensive model of performance. For example, employee abilities and organizational support are critical to the performance equation. Our focus is largely on performance that is directly affected by human agency because it can be altered by managers and because it is central to the way we think about performance. Moreover, because market and other extraorganizational influences affect membership, we focus primarily on two types of behaviors—reliable role behaviors and innovative and spontaneous activity—as the outcomes that define performance.
6. See Baltes et al. (1999), Berlinger, Glick, and Rodgers (1988), Boonzaier, Ficker, and Rust
References


