

# LEARNING FROM THE BEST

## *10 Common Characteristics of Benchmark Performers That Can Turn Your Department Around*

BY KENNETH JOHNSON

Throughout the 15 years that I have travelled across the United States and other countries, I have always been intrigued by benchmark performance. What characteristics separate some health care facilities from others? Benchmark institutions of all sizes—private imaging centers to large universities—share the following 10 characteristics.

### 1. HIGH THROUGHPUT

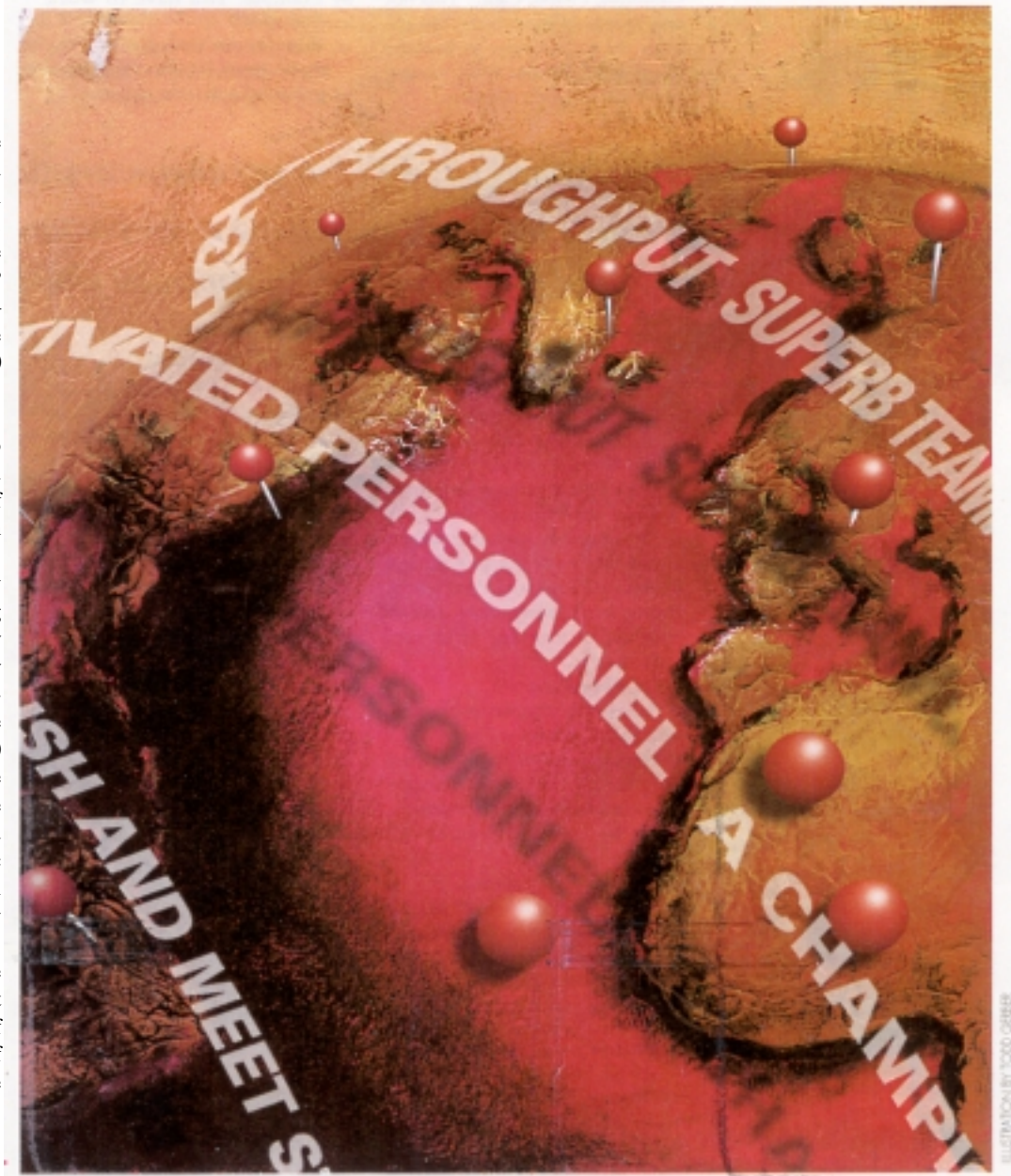
Benchmark performers normally do a very high volume of work—often more than double the volume of others. For example, at Edison Imaging, Edison, N.J., more than 575 procedures are performed every month (more than 30 per day) using one MRI system.<sup>1</sup> At the cardiology division of North Shore University Hospital, Long Island, N.Y., an average of 620 cases per month are performed in three labs (more than 10 per day). Of these, 175 to 200 are interventional procedures and 20 are pediatric procedures. At a third benchmark site, Ottawa Civic Hospital, Ottawa, Canada, more than 1,000 studies are performed every month on each of its two CT scanners.

Through an extremely high volume of work, personnel at these sites not only gain a great amount of experience in dealing with all types of pathology, but they learn to be extremely efficient in their work.

### 2. SUPERB TEAMWORK

A major misconception is that to

perform a high volume of work, everyone must deal with a great amount of stress. Instead, the op-



posite is true. The key is that sites must be properly staffed with qualified personnel and everyone must work together as a team.

Job descriptions can't get in the way for this to work. "When a CT scan is completed and 10 minutes exist before the next exam is to start, the technologist automatically transports the patient back to his or her room," explained Gordon AhTye, service integrator at Community Hospitals of Central California, Fresno, Calif. "This not only speeds up the process, but enables the technologist to become much more familiar with nursing personnel and their activities.

one "who is fair and cares a great deal about the type of work he does. The staff becomes a part of that. Everyone knows how important they are to the process. Although he is quiet with feedback, when he does speak, it means a great deal to them. His energy is the force that keeps us going."

According to Dr. Katz, "The key to successfully leading the staff is to treat the staff honestly and to lead by example. You have to work hard yourself"

#### 5. QUALITY WORK

Many associate high throughput with a compromise in quality. At

### *A key characteristic of most benchmark sites is the presence of a champion—someone who leads the charge.*

#### 3. MOTIVATED PERSONNEL

As stated by Lisa Braunreuther, a cardiovascular technologist at North Shore University Hospital, "When I first arrived at North Shore, I was offended that I was interchangeable, and that others could take over my job duties. However, I now thrive on it. Being interchangeable allows everyone to continue to expand their skills."

#### 4. A CHAMPION

A key characteristic of most benchmark sites is the presence of a champion—someone who leads the charge. In most cases, this person is a physician. For example, Hazel Hacker, Edison Imaging's business manager, describes Lawrence N. Tanenbaum, MD, as follows: "He gets involved with all aspects of the center and leads by example. He has high expectations of himself and therefore has the same expectations of his staff and the center."

Hacker's description of Dr. Tanenbaum nearly parallels that of Susan Somerville, North Shore's administrative director of radiology who describes

Stanley Katz, MD, chief of cardiology, as benchmark sites, the reverse is true. In order to operate efficiently, you cannot afford to routinely repeat work—you must do it correctly the first time. Also, the equipment must be maintained in optimum condition. You cannot experience frequent breakdowns or intermittent problems.

#### 6. AN ACCURATE INTERACTIVE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION DATA BASE

Benchmark performers don't estimate performance (i.e. "We do about 10 to 12 patients per day"). Instead, they accurately measure and study performance, have an excellent knowledge of their competition's strengths and weaknesses and can tell you anything you want to know about their customers. Without accurate data, you're shooting in the dark.

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## 7. PUBLISH AND FAEET STANDARDS OF SERVICE

Edison Imaging has a promise to both patients and referring physicians to have exams done correctly. The facility sends reports promptly and has a radiologist available to customize scans. Everyone at the center recognizes this promise and works diligently to fulfill it.

A key to North Shore's growth was its personnel's promise to serve its customers. Dr. Katz promised neighboring hospitals, "If you call us regarding a patient having cardiac problems, we will pick him up within one hour and transport him to our hospital."

"The promise has not only been met, but we bypass the emergency room and admit directly to the cath lab," according to Somerville.

## 8. SUPERB CUSTOFAER SERVICE AND RELATIONSHIPS

At Edison, Dr. Tanenbaum is on the phone through the day with physicians while his staff efficiently perform its duties. Periodic focus group sessions and other events are held for personnel to continually learn how to better serve customers and strengthen relationships with customers.

At North Shore, the signed report—with visual documentation—is on the chart before the patient leaves the department. In faa in most cases, the report is completed and on the dust before the patient is off the exam table.

## 9. WELL-DESIGNED AND EQUIPPED

One of the sleepers that enables or prevents benchmark performance is the design of the facility. The design of each work area must be optimized and properly equipped to enable personnel to function most efficiently.

Optimizing the design does nor mean oversizing the space. For example, at MRI of New Britain, New Britain, Conn., performance of nearly 500 exams per month is compressed into a very small footprint.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, one of the main sources of Ottawa Civic's benchmark performance is the way its facility design enables each person to perform key functions with some privacy, yet all can easily observe and communicate with one another.

Likewise, the most expensive equipment is not necessary to achieve benchmark performance. For example, even though most of New Britain's competition uses 1.5T magnets, New Britain has outperformed them with a .5T system. What is common at benchmark sites, however, is that equipment is normally updated to state-of-the-art status, resulting from a partnership with the site's vendor.

## 10. PARTNERSHIPS WITH VENDORS

Often, benchmark sites host site visits from vendors, and they are involved in focus groups with vendors and conduct research for them. True partnerships must be win-win relationships. For example, if a vendor keeps a site operating with state-of-the-an equipment, the site's staff members can learn from the vendor and earn standing as a showcase for potential customers. ■

## REFERENCES

1. Johnson KG (Mar. 1996). Redefining benchmarks: It's Time to Turn Guaranteed Failure Into Realistic Goals. *ADVANCE for Administrators in Radiology and Radiation Oncology* 6(3)29.

2. Tamas MJ (July 1996). Small wonder: MRI of New Britain. *ADVANCE for Administrators in Radiology and Radiation Oncology* 6(7)28.

## COMMON MYTHS ABOUT HIGH—THROUGHPUT SITES

### 1. **They work 24 hours-a-day.**

Very few high-throughput sites are open 24 hours-a-day. Instead, staff members start the day efficiently and work hard until they are finished.

### 2. **They do poor quality work.**

A site cannot perform a high volume of work if staff members have to stop routinely to repeat exams that were not done properly the first time. Instead, they must perform exams correctly the first time.

### 3. **Staff members are under a great deal of stress.**

Both throughput and quality decrease when personnel are overly stressed.

### 4. **They don't face tough competition.**

Everyone faces competition. Quite often, benchmark sites are surrounded by competitors who have larger facilities and more expensive equipment with higher overhead.

### 5. **Their patients aren't as sick as ours.**

Just the opposite is common. Benchmark sites serve as referral centers for patients with more difficult and challenging illnesses or conditions