



*Use of alternate
histories in
benchmarking: Building
better business*

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A Guerra das Pipas' (anthology), Editorial Divergência, 2019

Use of alternate histories in benchmarking: Building better business

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Received: 31 January 2022

Reviewed: 27 July 2022

Accepted: 19 September 2022

Published: 16 November 2022

Accepted Manuscript

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Abstract. Alternative histories (AH) can impact entire civilizations; therefore, they can also help rethink and rebuild businesses. Benchmarking is a consulting tool used to set objectives and evaluate performance against market leaders by comparing current and historical data. AH can be used to help organizations establish an ideal version of their past and determine where they would be now if things had been done differently. Building AH involves asking “What if we had been the leaders in the field?”; “What would this fantasy scenario look like?”; “What has the company done to become the benchmark?” Developing AH will lead to better strategies for the present and future. Through a literature review, this article sheds light on the potential uses of AH in benchmarking to promote better business practices through historical analysis and fantasy scenarios that are put to the test. It is about comparing a business with the best possible version of itself in the past in order to build the story of how it got there.

Keywords: Alternative history; Benchmarking; Business practices;
Strategy; Competitors

1. Introduction

Management paradigms constantly emerge to improve business results. Strategic management, scenario planning, business process reengineering, organizational culture and climate, organizational development, benchmarking -also known as inter-firm comparisons- [1] and change management, lean organizations [2], and self-learning organizations have been developed to satisfy specific needs. Benchmarking is a continuous process that should be viewed as a part of quality management programs and a critical element in strategic planning [3].

In the past decades, organizations have rediscovered the virtues of positioning themselves against the best, the value of a complete rehaul of processes and structures, the importance of lean organizations, and the power of innovation [2]. Benchmarking is a modern term often used to describe a broad range of human undertakings. It is particularly relevant in organizational improvement processes where the present state is considered inefficient and needs to be replaced by more desirable states of affairs [4]. Currently, benchmarking is one of the most used change management tools, mainly applied to increase business performance [5] and learn from others [6].

Benchmarking has been considered the study and use of foremost foreign experience [7]. In its simplest form, it can be defined as competitor research. Benchmarking is used to identify an organization's current position and recognize areas for improvement; it is meant to design and implement changes to achieve a strategic advantage by focusing on the competencies required to enhance performance [8]. A common way to evaluate an organization's performance is by comparing it to others. Such endeavors are usually performed under the assumption that better, more efficient states are attainable because external evidence suggests it [4]. In this sense, benchmarking is

commonly understood as the comparison of data, including inputs, process measurements, and results, with the purpose of measuring, analyzing, and improving one's business practices [9].

Traditionally, benchmarking has been carried out by examining different elements of the competition to highlight the best industry practices and promote their adoption to achieve similar results [10], making meaningful comparisons with others in order to identify opportunities for change. The earlier stages of benchmarking developments focused on processes or activities; however, as the practice has evolved, its scope has expanded to systems as a whole and specific strategies as well [11]. Although research on the matter focuses mainly on case studies and not particularly on establishing a theoretical framework for benchmarking, international studies suggest that it is a growing and changing practice [9] that has adapted to different contexts and has grown to include new perspectives that allow exploring diverse ways of thinking about and implementing change. This openness allows thinking about the possibilities for benchmarking, including using alternate histories to develop change initiatives.

The purpose of benchmarking is to be inspired by best practices [12], but they do not have to be limited to the competition or leaders in other fields. Best practices can be found outside or inside organizations, including creative and imaginative processes to analyze the past, generate alternatives, produce diverse scenarios where strategies are put to the test, and create better strategies for the future.

Alternate histories tend to suggest, at least implicitly, that our timeline is the "right" one and that any divergence in the past would result either in a disfigurement of the present or the possibility of better alternatives to our world [13]. The latter opens the door of benchmarking to novel

frameworks and methodologies that allow making comparisons in innovative ways, for example, comparing an organization's ideal alternative self to its current state and building the narrative of how it became its best version and use it to build a better future.

In this sense, this article aims to introduce the use of alternate histories into the approach and praxis of benchmarking to provide another perspective from which to promote change initiatives and sustained improvement.

2. Background

2.1 Benchmarking: meanings and applications

Conceptually, a benchmark was defined as a surveyor's mark indicating a standard or point of reference [14]. A benchmark was essentially the height above mean sea level, marked on public buildings, streets, and bridges; or a mark on a permanent object (such as a concrete post) that indicated elevation and served as a reference in topographic surveys and tidal observations [15].

The idea of the benchmark, and benchmarking, can be analyzed from different perspectives. By definition, a benchmark is a measure of quality. It was mainly used to level land extensions through leveling surveys, and it was also a common practice in guns and ammunition manufacturing through standardized procedures using a bench.

The notion of benchmark has also been associated with the field of sports [12], based on the idea that one could analyze the rival team by sitting on a bench and observing what players and coaches were doing. It can also be related to the idea of tryouts in which candidates and the most passive recruits [2] are waiting on the bench, focusing on what their competitors are doing.

Benchmarking has been described as a consulting tool to set objectives and evaluate performance, a practice to measure something in com-

parison to a standard, the search for best practices, and a way to gain insights for sustained continuous improvement using thorough feedback mechanisms. This feedback can include both internal and external referents of quality, performance, productivity, and results [4]

In the 1950s, benchmarking emerged as a part of reverse engineering, and in the 1970s it became a trademark at Xerox, based on competitive benchmarking. Surveys were conducted to monitor customer satisfaction and compare customers' reactions to Xerox's products and those of the competition and then to worldwide leaders [15]. At Xerox, benchmarking was more outward-looking and comparative, trying to identify possibilities for improvement and close existing performance gaps [15].

Competitive studies of industries have been around for centuries, but in the late 20th century, there was a refinement of the process, introducing a systematic pursuit of emulating practices that included certain unethical methods, such as stealing and creative swiping [6]. In order to understand how the method has evolved, benchmarking has been divided into different "generations" [17]. The first generation was reverse engineering, in which learning occurs by repeating the process. The second generation was competitive benchmarking, focusing primarily on direct competitors. Process benchmarking was the third generation, and processes common to different industries were assessed to identify the best practices. Finally, the fourth generation was that of strategic benchmarking, which included analyzing the strategies of both competitors and non-competitors; this helps develop tailor-made solutions instead of just creating an endless copy of someone else's business [18]. At the time, studies suggested that as globalization progressed, a fifth generation would be focused on global benchmarking, having an international scope

that would include cultural and business processes, negotiations, and agreements. This evolution process proves the ability of benchmarking to change and adapt to new methods and ideas to think about, plan, and implement change.

Additionally to the so-called “generations”, Camp proposed four types of benchmarking: internal, competitive, functional, and generic [19]. Internal benchmarking focuses on the best practices developed inside the organization, while competitive benchmarking establishes comparisons with direct competitors [5]. Functional benchmarking is based on the comparison of methods used in other organizations with similar functions and processes that could be in the same sector or industry. Finally, generic benchmarking includes identifying and comparing innovative work processes in any field [19].

As a change management practice, benchmarking initiates transformations through organizational learning and innovation [8]. The essence of this method is learning how to improve, from everyday activities to bigger, more complex processes. Organizational learning happens when any of the units acquire knowledge that is recognized as potentially useful for the organization as a whole; this includes learning either from their own experiences or from others [4].

2.2 Alternate history and change narratives

“What if” thinking has grown in popularity as alternate history thrives in periods of constant change, uncertainty, and volatility. These periods tend to be shaped by unforeseen contingencies, which make people aware of how a particular condition or disruptive element can change a whole sequence of events [20]. Alternate histories tend to look back to the past, especially to moments where something may have occurred differently that, in turn, altered that past’s fu-

ture, thus creating an alternative reality [21] or a divergent sequence of events. Especially in times of crisis, people become sensitive to how points of divergence can change the course of the future in one direction or another [20]. Contexts like these, where everything is changing, make people think about the past and wonder what would have happened if something had occurred differently.

Alternate histories serve various purposes. “The primary function of alternate history, the answer to the question “why do we ask ‘what if?’ is to express our changing views about the present” [22]. Alternate histories help people understand the forces that can influence the future by rethinking the past and its consequences [20]. They can also be used to “reinforce our sense of ourselves; they confirm the things we believe about ourselves and the values we hold” [13].

Speculating about what could have happened if specific events in the past had occurred or not inherently reflects individual or collective feelings about the present [22]. Alternate histories can represent either a past nightmarish vision of society that helps see the present in a better light or a utopian vision of the past that serves more as a critique of the present and can be used as a blueprint for the future [13]. In this sense, in periods that are perceived as positive or on the rise, alternate histories tend to validate the present by imagining an inferior past; on the other hand, eras that are considered negative or in decline tend to produce alternate histories that criticize the present by imagining a superior past [22].

“What-if” narratives make it clear that the course of history is not inevitable, and they have the power of reminding individuals that they can “choose responsibly and act morally and decisively as agents of historical change” [20]. This is crucial when considering organizational reflection and change initiatives such as benchmarking.

With organizations, societies, and the world in what seems like a perpetual state of exponential change, alternate history narratives are likely to proliferate in the future because “the same counterfactual mindset produced by our turbulent world can help us cope with it by altering our perspective in such a way as to understand the dynamics of rapid change” [20]. This also applies to organizations; alternate history narratives can help cope with change and support in managing it by reimagining the past and coming up with alternatives for the future.

3. Material and methods

This article presents the most relevant aspects of benchmarking to propose a way to introduce alternate history methods into this practice and provide an innovative perspective and an alternative to conventional change initiatives. A literature review was conducted to define the main elements and techniques surrounding benchmarking to identify where alternate history methodologies could be useful in thinking about improvement and implementing continuous development practices.

Due to the novelty of the subject and the scarcity of published works linking benchmarking and alternate history, the methodology for the literature review was based on an online search for articles, books, chapters, and research materials on the subject of benchmarking and alternate history separately, this with the objective of identifying methodological elements that could be adapted to integrate alternate history into benchmarking practices. The literature review led to the realization that benchmarking is an evolving practice that invites creativity and innovation. In this sense, the traditional benchmarking against the competition has been transformed, and companies have started playing with benchmarking against themselves, which allows for a reinter-

pretation of past and future desired states and the construction of stories around them that can help set a vision and promote change.

4. Results: Identifying possibilities for the use of alternate histories in benchmarking

In the current complex and ever-changing environment, businesses are looking for ways to increase their performance and achieve a competitive advantage. In order to do so, different methods, approaches, and indicators can be used, one of them being benchmarking. Benchmarking’s conventional forms include finding the best practices and know-how by studying, analyzing, and evaluating other companies, which generally are competitors or industry leaders [5]. This process is meant to gain a competitive advantage.

Even though benchmarking is traditionally done by measuring against the competition, this can pose some problems. Comparisons with competitors are sometimes hard to carry out as finding information about them can prove to be difficult; additionally, the available information may be useless in revealing procedures to beat the competition, and it might also uncover practices that are unworthy of replicating [9]. In this context, non-competitor benchmarking (comparing against leaders in other industries) and internal benchmarking (intra-organizational comparisons with other units of the business) have arisen as alternatives to traditional benchmarking [9, 4].

These examples of different benchmarking practices open the door for new possibilities, proving that it is an evolving field that adapts to diverse contexts. In this sense, a method related to internal benchmarking that has not been explored is the use of alternate history to promote comparisons with the hypothetical best possible version of an organization, exploring the alterna-

tive past to determine how the company got to that imagined desired state and replicate it for the future. There is never a better time to speculate about the past than the present because insecurity relating to the present shapes how people reimagine and rewrite the past [20].

Alternate histories are helpful in change initiatives because they alter the past not just for the sake of playing with narratives but to utilize them instrumentally to comment upon the present and potentially change it [22]. “Alternate history necessarily reflects its authors’ hopes and fears. It is no coincidence, therefore, that alternate histories largely come in two forms: as fantasy and as nightmare scenarios” [22]. Since benchmarking is traditionally used to compare oneself against the best, organizations can use alternate histories to compare themselves against the best alternative versions of themselves and use the story they build to develop strategies in the present.

Organizations use benchmarking to innovate, drawing upon their core competencies to create new leadership. But they need to start by knowing themselves since those that “do not know their own strengths or weaknesses can ill-prepare for future developments, and the only way to know what you wish to become is to know what you are, where you have been, and the history behind it all. The same principle applies to corporations” [2].

Alternate histories, in the form of fantasy scenarios that envision the past as superior to the present, express a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo, which is the first step in attempting to change the present; they nurture the thought that everything could have been different [22], and therefore that it still can.

5. Solutions and recommendations

5.1 Introducing alternate history into benchmarking practices

There is no single methodology to develop benchmarks. Nevertheless, Camp [19, 23] proposed six broad steps. It starts with the pre-planning stage, in which customer needs and desired business outcomes must be assessed and understood. The planning stage follows by identifying what needs to be benchmarked, identifying comparative organizations, and determining the methods that will be used to collect valuable data. The analysis stage is next and includes identifying current performance gaps and establishing future performance goals. In the integration phase, findings must be communicated to gain acceptance, and functional goals need to be established. Then comes the action stage, in which action plans must be developed and implemented and, if necessary, benchmarks will be recalibrated. Finally, a leadership position will be attained in the maturity stage, and benchmarking practices will be integrated into processes to ensure they are done permanently.

One of the most used strategies in benchmarking is to analyze the gaps between the current and desired states, identify causal relationships, and target areas for improvement [24]. This strategy is particularly useful to justify the use of alternate histories when data on the competition is limited or hard to find, as the purpose of alternate histories, in this particular case, is to find and manage that gap between what is, what could have been, and what could be.

Benchmarking against oneself involves a change of perspective in terms of what the organization is comparing itself to, from trying to be as good as everyone else to being as good as they can be or as they have been in an alternate past. To apply alternate history to benchmarking, organ-

izations can create fantasy scenarios that portray the alternate past as superior to the real historical record; this expresses dissatisfaction with the present [22] and provides a new way of thinking about where the organization would like to be by now, and what should have happened in the past to achieve that sought state of events. Using this methodology can help develop better strategies for the future.

Alternate histories are a new window on how we understand the past, invisible histories [28] that create interactive pasts that can be modified. Through substitute courses of events, one can rethink and rebuild businesses. “Alternate histories seem at first glance to deal with the past, yet they always do so with the obvious purpose of changing our present and future. Every alternate history looks at what are considered the flaws of the present and examines the possibilities for improving it by rehearsing several scenarios” [26].

Generally, when practicing benchmarking, it is common to get distracted by “easy-to-measure

or impossible-to-emulate differences in factor costs, scale, or culture, when the really important differences lie in how the harder-to-see value-creating activities are organized” [27]. Instead of focusing on the competition, organizations should compete against perfection, the best possible version of themselves, what they could have been and can still be in the future.

5.2 Guide for alternative histories for self-benchmarking

Using the literature review and proposed methodology for benchmarking as the foundation, the following table introduces basic steps for benchmarking and the way alternate histories can be applied to such processes, re-focusing on the organization instead of the competition. The table explains how this step-by-step benchmarking process can translate to alternate history and the construction of alternative narratives about the organization’s past.

Table 1. Introducing alternate histories into benchmarking processes

Conventional benchmarking process	Applying alternate histories
Select what to benchmark	Question the present, what if it was different? What if the organization was the top competitor? What would that look like?
Decide which external organizations or internal units of the organization will be used as a baseline	Determine what alternative version of the organization in question will be used as the standard; what would the desired state look like?
Document the current or previous processes	Begin to build the alternate history; what does the business/process/product history look like? How did it all start? Who was involved? What would the numbers look like? What would the state of mind be? What got the company there? Considering multiple variables is crucial, as “almost all historians will point to the multiplicity of circumstances and causes necessary to produce any particular outcome in history” [13].

Collect and analyze data	Create alternative narratives of what was done in that alternative past to get to the desired state and identify hypothetical best practices with the knowledge that exists in the present.
Measure performance against collected data	Identify how the alternative version differs from the current state. Identify keywords in the story (useful for future visions).
Create a plan	Based on the alternate history and the narratives surrounding it, determine what can be done in the present; what if we change something now? Nail down the vision of the desired state and the strategies to get there. Establish a new and cohesive story of the future and create a plan.
Implement the changes	Implement the changes
Repeat the process as needed	Repeat the process as needed

Source: Developed by the authors.

Alternate history writers have the power to retouch individual destinies and save entire civilizations [24] or, in this case, organizations. This method uses histories and stories that shape human's abilities to change, as participants become actors and drivers of transformation. Alternative histories fictionalize the counterfactuals traditionally embedded in historical thinking [29]; in doing so, they broaden people's imagination regarding what is possible [30].

Counterfactual reasoning can be used to entertain, compare, criticize, praise, or relativize the importance of specific events [31]. In benchmarking, it is crucial to criticize the current events and compare them to the ideal state. Using these methods and tools can help organizations establish an ideal version of their past and determine where they would be now if they had done something differently. This can lead to better strategies for the present and the future by comparing businesses to the best version of themselves instead of the competition.

This exercise aims to determine how to move from building an alternate history to changing a specific reality [32]. Constructing past scenarios

is insufficient in promoting change if they do not translate to forecasts and actions [33]. In this sense, the question "what if things had somehow been different?" is at the core of alternate history [34], and "how to make things different?" is at the core of benchmarking. Both can collide to create narratives for positive change based on the assumption that if things can be different now, they could have been different in the past. This allows to play with different alternatives and explore potential events linked to imagined situations within the realm of foreclosed possibilities [26]. To do so involves relying on alternate history's cause and effect framework [34] to find the determinant factors of the success scenario and replicate them in the present.

Incorporating alternate histories into benchmarking provides an intriguing window into how members of an organization understand its past, reimagining events and pinpointing turning points that can lead to finding things that need to change in the present [26]. "We will be better at looking forward if we learn how to look back" [33].

Alternate histories can help organizations learn from past successes and past failures, whether they are real or imaginary [33]. In this case, ap-

plying alternate history tools and techniques to benchmarking should focus on the potential past successes and the positive alternative to which the organization is comparing itself.

In this sense, appreciative inquiry (AI) needs to be incorporated into the process of using alternative histories in benchmarking. AI is a change method that focuses on positive aspects of an organization instead of its problems, valuing what is good, and doing research about it through the four phases of discovery, dream, design, and destiny. The positive core is created by the organization's strengths, goals, and achievements and is present in the stories that it tells about itself [35]. AI reflects the organization's interest in how people feel and think [35].

As can be observed in table 2, the four phases of appreciative inquiry can be easily incorporated into the use of alternative histories to provide more positive attitudes towards change that will result from benchmarking. Alternative histories provide a space that encourages lateral thinking,

inspiring teams with new ideas and developing solutions for recurring problems. Narratives have the power to create a shared identity and increase bonding, which can then be reflected in a culture of connection [36] and accountability [37].

While creating the alternative histories, it is vital to identify the subtle signals of resistance to change, such as the overestimation of personal contributions to the project; people taking credit for the success, even though it might belong to others. It is essential to understand that while developing the alternative histories, what got the organization here (to this moment) will not get it there (where it wants to be) [38].

Alternative histories can help maintain interest in benchmarking activities, making the process entertaining. This technique provides valuable insights into rethinking processes and identifying blind spots that the organization had at some moment in time. They should be a collaborative production and promote engaging learning.

Table 2. Four phases of appreciative inquiry

Phase	Goals	Tasks	Alternative histories
1. Discover	Identifying what gives life to the organization and determining what the elements that have been the best moments and processes are.	Conduct appreciative interviews.	Question the present Determine the alternative version of the organization.
2. Dream	Envisioning 'what might be', affirmative exploration, letting go of limits and constraints.	Formulate aspirational declarations (the dream-the vision).	Start building the alternate history and create alternative narratives of the past.
3. Design	Co-constructing an ideal of 'what should be', or what the organization should become.	Formulate provocative propositions.	Identify the interesting gaps and relevant keywords. Create a change plan and communicate it positively.
4. Destiny	Create the support to make the envisioned future sustainable.	Define, plan and execute the programs to make the dream come true.	Implement the changes and repeat the process as needed.

6. Future perspectives

As a practice, benchmarking will most likely keep evolving and adapting to new contexts and diverse organizational needs. There are multiple possibilities to establish comparisons and different ways to develop them. Alternate history has proven to introduce a fun approach that has attracted participants' attention. Surveys can be conducted to analyze the emotional side of incorporating alternative histories into benchmarking to identify how people react to change and also how people feel when being part of a group that will produce change. The narratives for the alternate histories can also be a source of research by identifying keywords used and the intentions of such keywords through text analytics.

7. Conclusion

Benchmarking is a practice that has evolved in terms of its sophistication and the diverse techniques that have been developed to carry it out; it is no longer only about data comparison or the use of structured methodologies; methods have become more informal [39]. This opens the door to new, more innovative, and creative possibilities such as alternate histories. Internal benchmarking creates the opportunity to use the knowledge that lies within the people in the organization. This helps them understand that the change to come is all about them and that, during the transitions towards the desired future, the organization can become as good as it can be or as good as it has been in the counterfactual narratives.

Introducing alternate history practices into benchmarking can help avoid some of the original limitations of the practice by focusing inward, backward, and forward to create a systemic view for continuous improvement. People who have thought about the future or whose ideas others have used to think about the future have tended to be speculative philosophers of history,

discerning patterns in the past that can then be projected forward [40].

For benchmarking to work when using alternative histories, it is of the essence to establish baseline metrics or the starting point for the histories to develop, which in alternate histories is referred to as the divergent point. Throughout the alternative histories, measurements must be established following the benchmarking methodology or step-by-step process presented in this article. The emphasis must be placed on improving performance by focusing on the company and its employees and not on someone else's.

Although there is a lot of potential for benchmarking and alternate history to work together, limitations have also been identified since history does not always prepare us for the future. In essence, change and uncertainty mean playing with black swans or Russian roulettes in which we might end up with five enriching histories and one statistic [25].

8. Round Table Insight

The oral presentations roundtable¹ of the *Second International Conference of 'What If?...'World History* where this work was presented was chaired by Tomas Vieira Silva and included presentations by Alfredo Behrens and Mário Mésquita. Two interesting "What if?" questions were introduced as their topics: "What if Jevons would have had his way?" by Alfredo Behrens and "What if Ricardo Jorge didn't exist?" by Mario Mesquita. The first integrated the ideas of the impact of solar cycles and solar activity on human behavior due to various effects such as a disruption of the circadian rhythm, which results in fight or flight responses, anxiety, anger, and even aggressiveness. Although the results cannot be considered absolute, data

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjdKZ5b-fU-Y>

from different countries show that specific patterns are visible and that it might be possible to establish predictions since solar activities are regular.

Unfortunately, Mario Mésquita was not able to stay during the roundtable insights, but his presentation was included in the discussions.

The importance of cycles in business, healthcare provisions, and of course, human behavior such as homicides was made evident. Interesting insights into benchmarking were provided; although there are different types of benchmarking, moving to other industries or business areas, countries might provide better insights than limiting oneself to traditional competition, especially since competitors might not want to share certain information, and also to widen a company's perspective. Alfredo Behrens introduced the example of the founders of Danone corporation and the importance of not using benchmarking as a limiting tool.

Other insights included the importance of appreciative inquiry in developing business narratives to avoid the dangers of developing alternative histories by identifying the best and the worst, which can lead to people fighting against each other instead of collaborating.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the University of Porto, and especially professor Ana da Silveira Moura, for the invitation to participate in this year's What if? event. Special thanks go to the brilliant Alfredo Behrens, who brought about an interesting perspective on human behavior, and more especially for his invaluable comments, and to professor Mario Mesquita for a very interesting presentation that sheds new light on the COVID-19 pandemic, and to Tomás Vieira Silva for chairing an interesting (and very entertaining) roundtable.

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