

BEYOND BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION

Benefits Frameworks Fail When They Measure Value Without Moving Authority

A practitioner's reflection on why registers and owners are not enough to turn business cases into operating results



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“The most memorable spreadsheet cannot realise a benefit.”

1. The register was complete and the benefits were not

The benefits register contained forty-three entries. Every line had a description, an owner, a target value, a due date and a traffic-light rating. The programme board reviewed it each month. The business case still showed £12.4 million of annual benefit.

Yet when the first operational review was held, only £2.1 million could be connected to a changed budget, a measured service result or a removed cost. Eleven benefits depended on managers changing local processes that were not in the programme plan. Six relied on the same reduction in support effort. Four owners had moved roles. One £1.8 million saving assumed the closure of a facility that the executive team had never agreed to close.

This composite is not a story about a badly maintained register. It is the story of a well-maintained register doing the wrong job.

The recurring lesson from benefits work is that organisations do not fail because they lack a framework. They fail because the framework records value while leaving authority, operational change and evidence outside it. The textbook asks us to define, measure, track and review benefits. The lived programme asks harder questions: Who can alter the operation? Which budget will actually change? What will leadership do when the forecast weakens? What happens after the programme closes?

A practical benefits framework works only when it makes those questions unavoidable.

2. The textbook is right — and still insufficient

The established disciplines are sensible. Define benefits clearly. Establish measures. Name owners. Build profiles. Track dependencies. Review progress. Compare outcomes with the business case.

None of this should be discarded. The strongest defence of the conventional framework is that poor discipline creates fantasy. Without a baseline, every improvement can be claimed. Without a measure, aspiration passes for evidence. Without an owner, responsibility dissolves. Without regular review, the case is remembered only at approval and closure.

That defence is correct.

The weakness appears in the assumption that better specification creates stronger commitment. It does not. A benefit profile may state that a business-unit director owns a saving, but the director may lack authority over recruitment, property, contracts or shared services. A register may show a due date, but the programme plan may contain

none of the operational actions needed to achieve it. A finance partner may validate the arithmetic, but cannot prove that the programme caused the movement.

The textbook treats ownership as a field. Practice reveals ownership as a bargain involving authority, duties and consequence.

That difference explains why mature-looking frameworks often produce immature results.

3. Benefits are operating changes, not programme outputs

Programmes deliver capabilities. Benefits arise when operations use those capabilities to change performance.

The distinction sounds elementary, yet much benefits practice collapses it. A new system is marked complete, so productivity is assumed to follow. A process is designed, so compliance is forecast. Training is delivered, so adoption is treated as achieved. The programme reaches its milestone while the business has not changed the conditions that convert the output into value.

The causal chain is longer:

- the programme produces a usable capability;
- people adopt it to a required standard;
- old work, cost or behaviour is actually removed;
- the operating measure changes;
- finance or management evidence confirms the result;
- leadership accepts the consequence in budgets, capacity or service commitments.

Every link needs an owner. Every break needs a decision.

In practice, the most difficult link is often removal. Organisations add the new system but retain the old spreadsheet. They introduce a standard process but preserve local exceptions. They reduce handling time but leave staffing and budgets unchanged. They release theoretical capacity and immediately consume it elsewhere, then still count the release as a cash saving.

The programme has enabled improvement. The organisation has declined to realise it.

A benefits framework becomes practical at the point where it governs what the business must stop, remove or reallocate – not merely what the programme will deliver.

4. The owner must control the mechanism

The phrase “benefit owner” creates a comforting sense of accountability. Too often it names the most senior person willing to appear in the register rather than the person who controls the operational mechanism.

Consider a composite service programme expecting £4 million of annual efficiency. The nominated owner is a divisional director. The value depends on reducing duplicate entry

across six teams, ending a contractor arrangement and removing thirty-five posts through natural turnover.

The director can instruct the teams, but contractor renewal sits with procurement, recruitment controls sit with human resources, and two of the teams report to another division. The owner has status but not sufficient authority.

At the first review, progress is rated amber. At the second, the programme asks for a recovery plan. At the third, the benefit date moves by a quarter. Nothing in the framework forces leadership to repair the authority gap. The owner remains named, the benefit remains tracked and the programme remains apparently controlled.

A workable framework would not accept the nomination without testing four conditions:

- Can the owner change the relevant process or service?
- Can the owner commit the necessary people and budget actions?
- Can the owner obtain cooperation across organisational boundaries?
- Can the owner accept a reduction in forecast or escalate to someone who can?

If any answer is no, the framework must name additional decision-makers or move ownership upward. Accountability without authority is not stretch. It is concealment.

A benefit owner should not merely receive a report. The owner should sign an operational commitment: actions, evidence, tolerance and escalation. The document can be short. The commitment cannot be vague.

5. The baseline is a decision, not a number

Benefits arguments often become arguments about arithmetic because arithmetic feels objective. The harder issue is what the organisation chooses to count.

A baseline should answer three questions:

1. What is happening now?
2. What would happen without the programme?
3. Which movement can reasonably be attributed to the programme?

In April 2008, many organisations have extensive management information, finance ledgers and operational reports. They do not necessarily have consistent answers. One department measures cost per transaction including overhead; another excludes it. A business case treats vacancies as filled; the budget assumes they remain open. Service volumes are rising, yet the saving is calculated from a flat workload.

A single baseline figure hides these choices.

Practical work needs an evidence pack showing source, period, unit, adjustment, counterfactual and confidence. Where evidence is weak, say so. A range with an explicit assumption is more governable than a precise number assembled from incompatible records.

The important decision is not whether the baseline looks attractive. It is whether leaders are prepared to approve investment at the confidence available and revisit that decision when the evidence improves.

Frameworks fail when they permit uncertainty at approval to become certainty in reporting.

6. The portfolio is where benefit fiction compounds

Individual programme claims may each appear reasonable. Their combination can be impossible.

One programme claims a twenty-person productivity release. Another claims a budget reduction from the same department. A third depends on those people supporting implementation. Each business case is internally coherent. The portfolio counts the same capacity three times.

Benefits must therefore be governed at the boundary between investments, not only within them. A portfolio view should record:

- the cost, capacity, revenue or service measure being changed;
- every programme claiming an effect on it;
- whether the value is cashable, avoidable, productive capacity or service improvement;
- which claim takes precedence if assumptions conflict;
- who owns the combined operational decision.

This is less glamorous than publishing an aggregate benefits total. It is also more truthful.

A portfolio that adds programme forecasts without reconciling their shared assumptions is not measuring value. It is adding optimism.

7. The review must be allowed to change the case

The most revealing moment in benefits governance is not when a benefit turns green. It is when evidence says the approved value is no longer credible.

Weak frameworks encourage preservation. The original number remains in the business case; a revised forecast appears in commentary; the gap is explained as timing or dependency. Leaders fear that reducing the benefit will make the original decision look wrong. Programme teams fear that honesty will be treated as failure.

The result is a register full of numbers that nobody believes and nobody is authorised to change.

The framework must define the decisions available at review:

- continue with the current plan;
- fund an enabling action;
- rephase delivery or operational change;
- reduce the forecast;
- redirect the investment;
- stop remaining work;

- continue for strategic or regulatory necessity while acknowledging that the original return no longer holds.

These choices convert benefits reporting into investment control.

The practical measure is not whether every promised benefit is delivered. Some assumptions will fail. The measure is whether the organisation recognises failure early enough to choose intelligently.

A forecast that cannot be reduced is not a forecast. It is a political commitment wearing the clothes of measurement.

8. Finance must validate value without inheriting ownership

When benefits become doubtful, organisations often turn to finance. This is understandable. Finance has access to ledgers, budgets and cost definitions. It can prevent released hours being reported as cash, identify double counting and test whether a saving has altered expenditure.

But finance cannot own the operational change simply because it validates the value. It cannot force managers to remove a process, change a roster, close a facility or stop recruiting. Making finance the owner shifts responsibility away from the people controlling the mechanism.

The division of labour should be clear:

- the business owner changes performance;
- the programme delivers enabling capability and coordinates dependencies;
- finance validates the measure and financial treatment;
- the portfolio or programme office protects the integrity of the framework;
- the investment owner decides when evidence changes the case.

This clarity matters because benefits offices can become reporting factories in the same way as PMOs. They chase updates, calculate totals and colour ratings while the operational decisions sit elsewhere.

The most memorable spreadsheet cannot realise a benefit.

9. Closure is where the original bargain is tested

Programme closure often exposes what the framework truly believed.

If benefits were treated as programme deliverables, unresolved items become residual actions. The programme team leaves, the reporting cycle stops and operational managers inherit measures they did not design. Six months later, the business case cannot be reconstructed without finding archived papers and former staff.

If benefits were treated as operating commitments, closure looks different. The operational owner already runs the process. Measures appear in ordinary performance reviews. Finance knows how value will enter budgets or management accounts. Remaining actions have dates and authority. A portfolio forum can still make decisions if the forecast weakens.

Programme closure should therefore require a transfer test:

- Can operations produce the evidence without programme staff?
- Are the enabling actions still funded and scheduled?
- Does the named owner retain authority?
- Is there a forum with power to respond to variance?

A “no” does not always prevent closure. It does require the investment owner to accept the control gap explicitly.

The programme ends. The obligation to prove or revise the investment case does not.

10. What actually works

A practical benefits framework is not primarily a better register. It is a chain of agreements.

It works when:

- the outcome is stated independently of the solution;
- the baseline separates current performance, natural movement and programme effect;
- the mechanism connects capability, adoption, operational action and value;
- the owner controls the mechanism or has an explicit route to authority;
- enabling work sits in the integrated plan before delivery;
- portfolio claims are reconciled across shared budgets and capacity;
- reviews can change the investment, not merely the rating;
- benefits transfer into ordinary operations with evidence and decision rights intact.

This is more demanding than the textbook sequence because it exposes leadership. It asks executives to decide when evidence is incomplete, to resolve conflicts between business units and to reduce benefits when the case weakens. It removes the shelter of saying that the framework exists and the owner is named.

That discomfort is the sign that the framework is doing real work.

The lessons from practice are not that benefit profiles, registers and reviews are useless. They are that those artefacts succeed only when they carry authority through the life of the investment. Without authority, they document hope. With authority, they enable judgement.

The practical framework that works is the one that makes value an operating obligation and keeps the business case alive as a governing instrument.

Everything else is benefits administration.