



FORESIGHT

Welcome to FORESIGHT and the Laboratory Reporting and Analysis Tool (LabRAT)

Tools for self-assessment and for participating
in FORESIGHT

Introduction¹

FORESIGHT: A business approach to improving forensic services

Managers of scientific laboratories see themselves as scientists first and managers second; consequently, they tend to devalue the managerial aspects of their jobs². Forensic laboratory managers are no different but the stakes may be much higher given the importance of quality science to the criminal justice system. The need for training and support in forensic laboratory management has been recognized for many years but little has been done to transition the tools of business to the forensic laboratory environment.

FORESIGHT is a business-guided self-evaluation of forensic science laboratories across North America. The participating laboratories represent local, regional, state, and federal agencies. Faculty from the WVU College of Business and Economics provided assistance, guidance, and analysis. Standardized definitions for metrics evaluate work processes, linking financial information to work tasks and functions. Laboratory managers can use these functions to assess resource allocations, efficiencies, and value of services—the mission is to measure, preserve what works, and change what does not.

Benchmarking is improving performance by recognizing, understanding, and integrating best—or at least better—practices from either inside the organization or from outside entities. To move forward on a benchmarking project, a standard of comparison must be established. Currently in forensic science, no such standard exists.

FORESIGHT codifies the standard metrics to collect and these provide the basis for broad yet deep comparisons between forensic laboratories. FORESIGHT shows processes, strategies, resources, and allocations at a detailed level. FORESIGHT laboratories participate on a volunteer basis. In agreement with the laboratories and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), only the laboratories performing in the upper quartile of a metric would be identified: The goal of FORESIGHT is improvement, not punishment. Laboratories not in the upper quartile are self-aware of their results and performance relative to the other laboratories. The laboratories in the upper quartile then represent a “better practice” contact to discuss what processes may have led to that performance.

FORESIGHT is open to any forensic laboratory that completes and submits a Laboratory Reporting and Analysis Tool (LabRAT) form.

¹ This project is being conducted with support from the National Institute of Justice (Award 2003-RC-CX-K001)

² Geles C, Lindecker G, Month M, Roche C. *Managing Science*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.

Laboratory Analysis and Reporting Tool (LabRAT)

The ratios used are collected through the Laboratory Reporting and Analysis Tool (LabRAT). LabRAT is a condensed, active data collection tool that allows for easy entry of information most forensic laboratory directors should have or be able to get readily. The actual LabRAT forms are available in spreadsheet format. LabRAT contains a glossary of definitions and investigative areas, as well as examples of how to count samples and items within a case.

It is a natural tendency to lose sight of the organizational goals and begin to manage (i.e., influence) the measures. Remember that the ratios serve to proxy performance in the individual areas of concern. ***No single ratio should be evaluated in isolation. There is a natural temptation to play to the measures and lose sight of the goals.*** For example, with a goal of a lower cost per case, one way for crime lab managers to improve the metric is to assume more risk, for example, reducing quality assurance activities. But, that risk may prove dangerous and even devastating in the long-run. “Accountability should be for results and for due process. Too many numbers and you drive out judgment.”³ The metrics themselves are not the answers but are pointers to the processes which are the answers to questions of improved performance.

Participation and Benefits

With these measures as a baseline, production and efficiency functions can be derived for one or more forensic laboratories. FORESIGHT is open to any forensic laboratory that completes and submits a LabRAT form. **By doing so, the participating laboratory will receive a detailed, integrated report showing their metrics compared with the other participants.** This report will be an important step in defining what can be improved, what can be changed, and what can be retained for a quality forensic service system.

Completed LabRAT forms should be emailed to max.houck@mail.wvu.edu.

³ Henry Mintzberg, as quoted in Pakalnis V. Canada's Management Guru. *Canadian Government Executive*. 2007;January:6-8.