

Benchmarking Help Center Guide

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Introduction

Requirements for building owners to benchmark energy performance and disclose that information to the market have been passed in a number of U.S. cities and states in recent years. To help increase awareness of and compliance with these new laws, cities are conducting broad outreach, education, and training activities aimed at supporting building owners, managers, and other affected parties. Benchmarking is often a new exercise for many building owners and managers—especially those with multifamily or smaller buildings—and cities have recognized the need to provide appropriate resources to the building sector to support successful implementation and good data quality.

A crucial component of these efforts in both New York City (NYC) and Seattle was the creation of a benchmarking help center. These help centers generally consisted of trained staff available by phone and email to provide direct assistance to building owners, managers, service providers, and others. They proved to be critical not only in providing general and technical assistance, but also in allaying concerns of building owners and managers, expanding outreach capacity, and improving data quality and compliance rates. Help center staff answered questions on a range of topics, including use of and troubleshooting in ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager; the law and requirements for compliance; submittal of information to the city; acquiring and uploading data from utilities; and getting assistance from third-party service providers.

This guide shares recommendations for establishing a benchmarking help center based on experiences and lessons learned in NYC and Seattle.

1. Planning the Help Center

The planning process for help centers in NYC and Seattle included establishing partner relationships, securing funding, hiring and training staff, finding space, conducting outreach, and creating resources. On the whole, this process took between three and six months.

Recommendation: Allow at least 12 weeks for the help center planning process.

Partnerships

In both cities, agencies implementing the benchmarking regulations worked with local nonprofits and colleges to coordinate, fund, and staff help centers. See Table 1 for a list of partnerships and roles.

The questions that help center staff received were wide ranging and concerned technical assistance with Portfolio Manager; acquiring, interpreting, and uploading data from utilities; understanding the law; requirements for compliance, enforcement, and penalties; third-party energy service vendor assistance; and the process for final submittal. Because of the diversity of inquiries, it is crucial to include all partner organizations in the planning process to develop comprehensive resources (fact sheets, compliance guides, FAQs) and to ensure that callers receive consistent and timely information. In particular, representatives from utilities and the government agencies implementing and enforcing the ordinance should be involved in the initial planning and ongoing operation of the help center.

Recommendations:

- **Include all relevant stakeholders in the planning process and ongoing operation of the help center.**
- **Maintain lines of communication with the customer service centers of any utilities that are providing utility data and with agencies implementing and enforcing the ordinance.**

Table 1: Help Center Partnerships

City	Time Period	Partners	Roles
New York City	2011	New York State Energy Research and Development Agency	funding
		NYC Department of Buildings	space, coordinator
		Mayor's Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability	space, coordinator
		City University of New York	training, staff, resources
Seattle	Phase 1 (Aug. 2011-Nov. 2011)	City of Seattle	funding, coordinator, drop-in computer lab space
		Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance (NEEA)	funding
		Northwest Energy Efficiency Council (NEEC)	staff member, technical support space
	Phase 2 (Dec. 2011-Oct. 2012)	Institute for Market Transformation	funding
		South Seattle Community College	students, training
		Northwest Center for Sustainability and Innovation	hiring manager
		Northwest Energy Efficiency Council (NEEC)	technical support management, staff member, space

Staff and Training

In both cities, help centers partnered with local colleges to recruit interns as staff. In NYC, interns were hired from a pool of students who had previously attended a nine-hour workshop that included hands-on training in ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager and background on Local Law 84 and the Greener, Greater Buildings Plan. In Seattle, potential interns were selected based on their completion of an energy management program at the local community college. The program included a section on Portfolio Manager and was supplemented by a half-day benchmarking workshop, sponsored by NEEA/BetterBricks, that served as part of the interns’ initial help-desk orientation and training.

While help centers can be a valuable work development opportunity for the students involved, it is important to align expectations and needs between the college providing the interns and the city. For example, in Seattle, the NW Center for Sustainability and Innovation viewed the technical support center primarily as an internship opportunity, preferring to staff it with multiple part-time employees who could cycle through every few months. NEEC, which was responsible for managing the support center, found that consistent staffing, with longer-term commitments from a small number of full-time contractors, enabled better customer care.

Exceptional customer service skills were found to be as necessary for interns as knowledge of Portfolio Manager; Seattle initially had quick turnover because interns were well-prepared for technical questions but less prepared to deal with frustrated customers. Both centers hired a full-time manager to supervise the interns, answer calls and emails, field particularly difficult or complex situations, create

resources and tools for the interns, act as the liaison between partners, oversee and manage the call and email logs, and manage general logistics.

Recommendations:

- **Hire a full-time, on-site manager.**
- **Consider partnering with a local college or university to staff the help center.**
- **Be clear on expectations for the support staff.**
- **Prepare staff for the customer service aspect of support, and develop a proper protocol for handling difficult customers.**

Outreach

In order for a help center to be effective at providing the necessary support to building owners, there must be general awareness among stakeholders of its existence, purpose, and operating hours.

Information about a help center should be included in all notices about a city's benchmarking requirement, as well as on the city website. In addition, information on the help center should be supplied in outreach materials, including the materials targeted at service providers and at trade and real estate associations.

Recommendation: information about a help center should be included on the city's website, in notices and outreach materials about a city's benchmarking requirement, and during outreach activities.

2. Operations

Budgeting for a Help Center

Typical costs for running a help center for a year fall in the range of \$50,000 to \$100,000; staffing needs are in the range of one to three full time employees (FTEs). Costs are generally reflective of the hours of operation, staffing levels, and overhead expenses. About two-thirds of NYC's budget was spent on labor, with one-third going to overhead and space rental at CUNY. Nearly all (97%) of Seattle's budget went toward labor costs; physical space was provided by NEEC at a modest pro-rata charge.

In Seattle, approximately 10,000 buildings were impacted by the benchmarking regulation, while about 16,000 buildings had to be benchmarked in NYC. In the course of one year (April 2011-April 2012) in NYC, two compliance deadlines passed and the help center received around 2,534 calls. In a similar timeframe (June 2011-June 2012), the Seattle help center received 1,645 calls and 1,490 emails, for a total of 3,135 interactions. Call volume generally correlates with the number of impacted buildings but is also influenced by

many other factors. For instance, in Seattle, high call volume was a result of two primary factors: a complex process for owners to access energy-consumption data to benchmark, and a large number of owners who had never benchmarked before.

When budgeting for a help center, factors such as size and type of buildings affected by the requirement, phase-in timeline for the ordinance, complication of obtaining data from utilities, third party energy services company participation, and sophistication of the building managers (with regard to energy management) will all likely affect call volume.

Recommendations:

- **Allocate \$50,000 to \$100,000, or 1 to 3 FTEs, to running a benchmarking help center.**
- **Consider the building stock, building owners, and policy structure when estimating support needs and allocating budget and staff for the help center.**

One of the greatest challenges for the help centers was managing the spikes in call volume that preceded compliance deadlines and followed warning notifications from enforcing agencies (see Figures 1 and 2). First-year help center operating hours in Seattle and New York City (Table 2) were found to be generally sufficient, although both centers would have benefited from more staff or longer hours in the weeks prior to compliance deadlines and after letters from the cities were sent out. The Seattle Help Center was able to respond to some callers by email, and having the ability to respond to simple or common questions by email saved Seattle staffers a significant amount of time. NYC preferred help center staff to respond to all requests for help by phone.

As an additional strategy for managing the peaks and troughs of activity associated with compliance deadlines, help center staff in Seattle used periods of low call volume to conduct proactive outreach to building owners, managers, and others involved in the benchmarking process. This direct outreach helped improve overall compliance rates.

Seattle staff also hosted drop-in help sessions in a computer lab for two hours every week to provide in-person assistance to customers, which was found to be critical for supporting customers who were frustrated with the process or not computer literate. The NYC Help Center found it difficult to help callers who did not have access to a computer or were not computer-savvy.

Table 2: Operating Hours

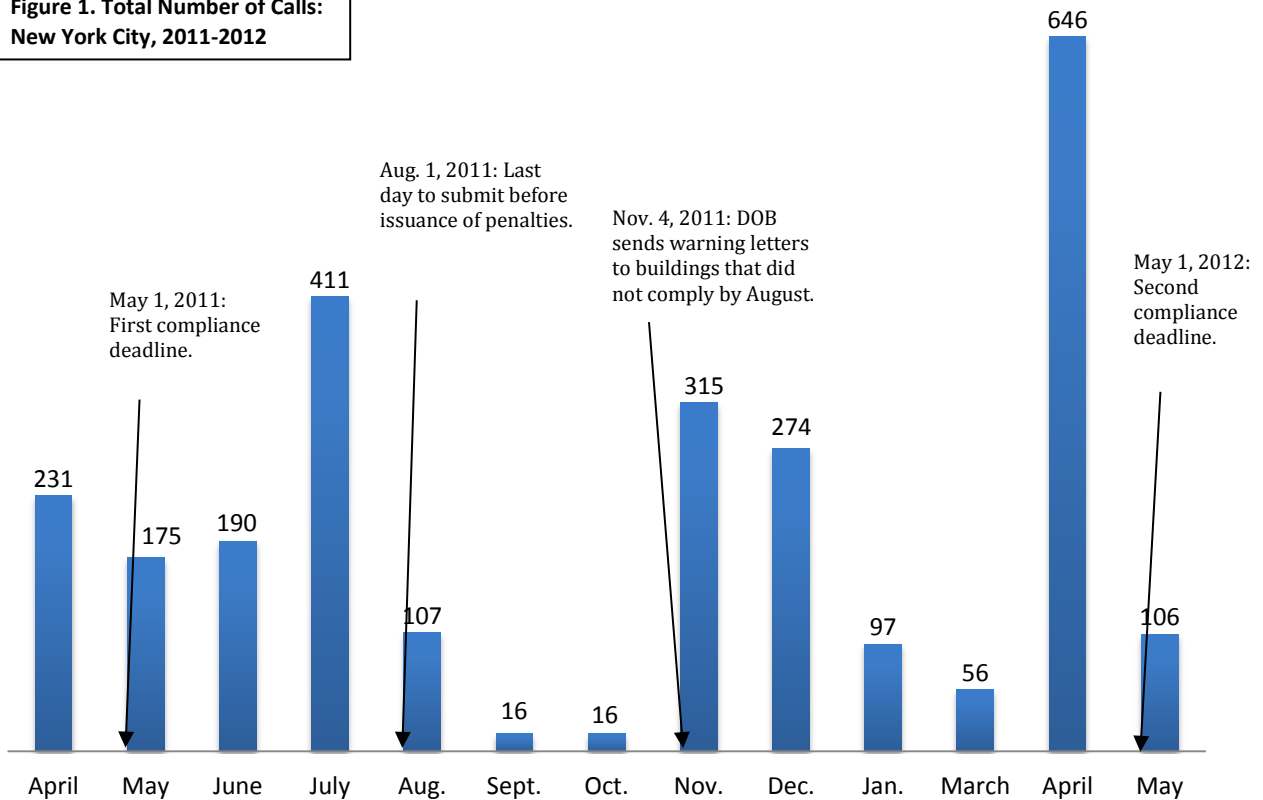
City	Time Period	Hours	Average Number of Staff in Office*
New York City	March 2011 – Aug. 1, 2011	10am-4pm, Monday-Friday	2
	Aug. 2, 2011 – Sept. 15, 2011	CLOSED—callers could leave voicemails	0
	Sept. 15, 2011 – Dec. 20, 2011	10am-5pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays; 10am-2pm, Fridays	2-3
	January 2012 – May 2012	10am-5pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays; 10am-2pm, Fridays	2-3
Seattle	August 2011 – November 2011	8am-5pm, Monday-Friday	1
	December 2012 – present	8am-5pm, Monday-Friday	3

Note: Number of staff includes on-site manager.

Recommendations:

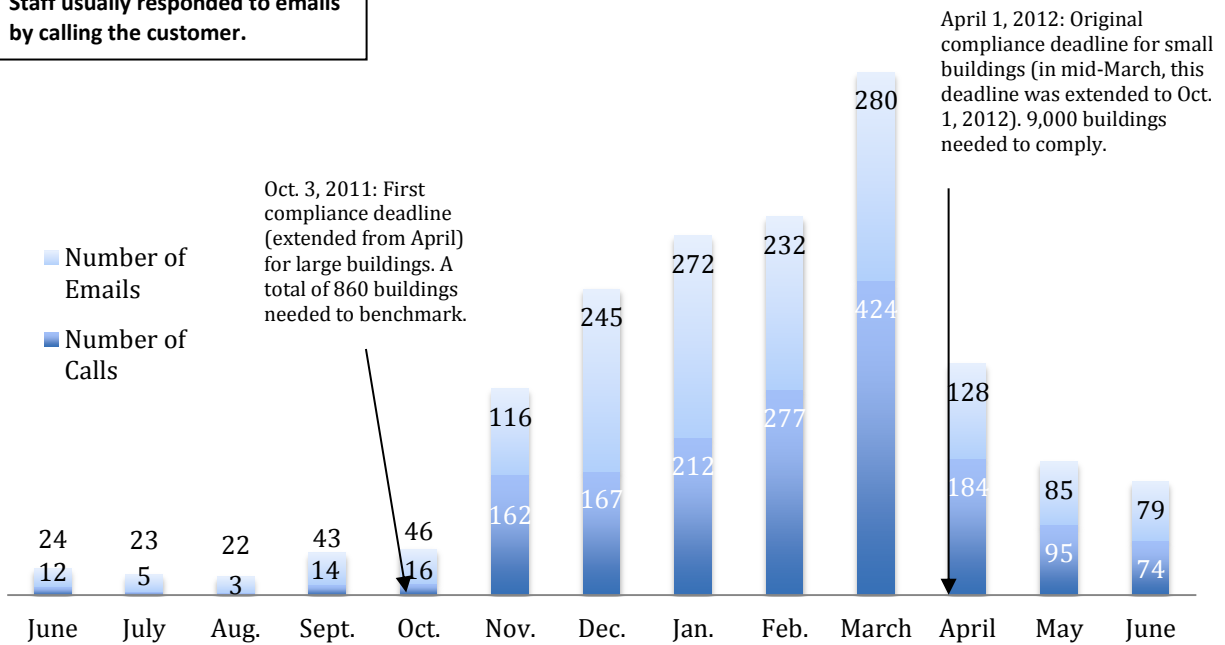
- **Structure the hours of operation based on compliance deadlines, timing of notices and warning letters, and enforcement processes.**
- **As the compliance deadlines near, increase staff number or expand hours of service.** During months when low call volumes are predicted, engage staff in proactive outreach or decrease operating hours by switching to a callback system.

Figure 1. Total Number of Calls: New York City, 2011-2012



- **If resources are available, provide periodic drop-in help sessions with computers available.** Such sessions are most helpful in the months directly preceding the compliance deadlines.
- **Create a clear protocol for staff to respond to callers by email.**

Figure 2. Total Number of Calls and Emails: Seattle, 2011-2012.
Staff usually responded to emails by calling the customer.



3. Implementation

Volume Tracking

A call and email log was critical to track phone calls and emails, inquiry topics, and individual customers. In NYC in 2011, questions about ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager were most common (32% of all calls), followed by questions about final submittal (21%). In 2012, a majority of the questions were general inquiries about Portfolio Manager (captured in the “Misc.” category) and getting started in Portfolio Manager—staffers were surprised by the large volume of callers who still needed an introduction to Portfolio Manager and help setting up accounts; they felt they could have been better

prepared in terms of Year-Two resources and trainings for benchmarking beginners. See the full breakdown of calls in NYC for April 2011 through May 2012 in Figures 3 and 4.

Of callers who could be categorized in NYC, representatives from management companies made up the largest group: 23% of total calls in 2012. Building owners accounted for 16% of callers, and consultants and service providers accounted for 14%.

The logs have also served as a means to improve the building owner and manager contact database.

Recommendation: a contact tracking log should be meticulously maintained to track customers, the impact, and the effectiveness of help centers. This log should include, at a minimum, the following categories: date; case number; method of contact; name of caller/emailer; relationship to facility and facility type; building address or building identification number; contact info; topic of inquiry; summary of response. Also consider tracking how callers learned about the call center and whether or not the help center provided adequate help. Possible topics of inquiry, caller positions, and facility types should be standardized (for example, by creating a drop-down list of a limited number of options).

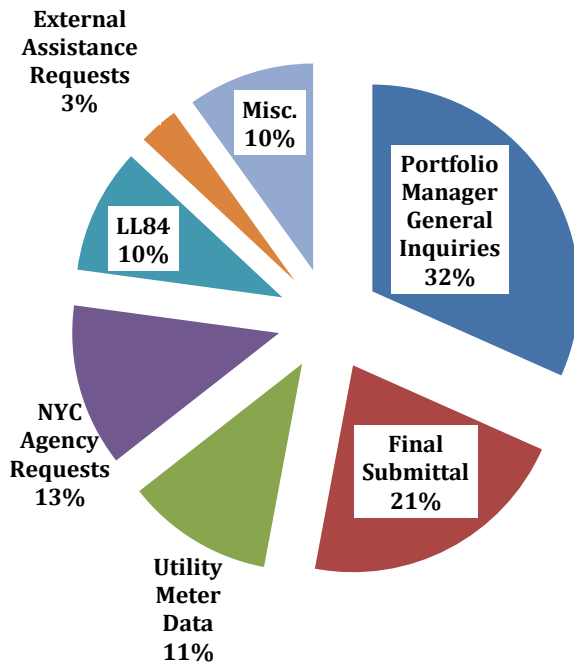


Figure 3. Percentage of Calls by Topic: New York City, 2011

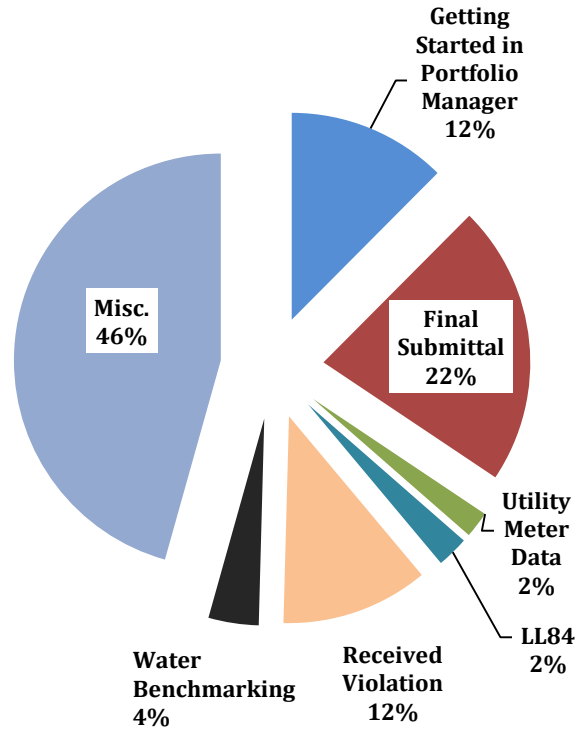


Figure 4. Percentage of Calls by Topic: New York City, 2012. The “Misc.” category includes Portfolio Manager troubleshooting and external assistance requests.

Resources & Tools

The most useful tool utilized by staff in the NYC Benchmarking Help Center was a master account within Portfolio Manager, which gave the interns read-only access to customers’ accounts. With the master account, staff could see callers’ facility and energy data and use this access to give detailed instructions to callers who were having trouble using Portfolio Manager. See Appendix A for instructions on creating such an account. Seattle subscribed to the GoToMeeting service so that help center staff could offer hands-on assistance from a remote location.

Appendix B contains links to selected resources. Staff in both cities created internal resources, which included frequently asked questions (FAQs) for staff to consult, memos, and instructions on interpreting and uploading utility data, which were instrumental in equipping the staff and providing help to customers. Both cities found that it was valuable to create resources at varying levels of detail, to meet different audience needs. These documents were also made available online.

Recommendations:

- **Set up a master account within Portfolio Manager.**

- **Create jurisdiction-specific resources and support tools that staff can refer to and provide to building owners.**

Capitalizing on the Benefits of the Help Center

In addition to aiding building owners, the help centers have provided the significant benefit of allowing cities to assess the effectiveness of their outreach and assistance efforts, as well as to identify what stakeholders find most confusing about the requirements and which groups of stakeholders need more targeted outreach or assistance from the city. In Seattle, help center staff have taken on a more active role, proactively contacting owners whose buildings have reporting errors and are not in compliance and helping them comply with the requirements.

Recommendations:

- **Continue meetings with collaborating partners, overseeing agencies, and on-site manager to evaluate how city resources can be improved and best utilized.**
- **Use the call and email log to track and analyze areas of confusion and groups of stakeholders that need more outreach and assistance.**
- **Consider a proactive role for help center staff to assist with outreach to those required to comply, and with troubleshooting and identification and resolution of reporting errors.**

Acknowledgements

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About the Institute for Market Transformation (IMT)

The Institute for Market Transformation (IMT) is a Washington, DC-based nonprofit organization promoting energy efficiency, green building, and environmental protection in the United States and abroad. IMT's work addresses market failures that inhibit investment in energy efficiency and sustainability in the building sector. For more information, visit imt.org.

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Appendix A ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager Master Account

How to Create a Master Account Within Portfolio Manager

1. Go to www.energystar.gov and, in the sidebox "Portfolio Manager Login," click "Register."
2. Fill out the new user information required by ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager.
3. You must check the box labeled "**Display my user and organization name to ALL Portfolio Manager users who wish to share facilities with my account.**"
4. Click "Submit."

Note: the update of ESPM due out in June 2013 will do away with this function and allow any user to share facilities with any other user.

Appendix B External and Internal Resources

New York City

- First-Time Benchmarking Guidance Document
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/gbee/downloads/pdf/first_time_benchmarking_guidance.pdf\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/gbee/downloads/pdf/first_time_benchmarking_guidance.pdf)
- Benchmarking Refresher Guide
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/gbee/downloads/pdf/2nd_time_benchmarking_refresher.pdf\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/gbee/downloads/pdf/2nd_time_benchmarking_refresher.pdf)
- Benchmarking FAQs
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/sustainability/benchmarking_faqs.shtml\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/sustainability/benchmarking_faqs.shtml)
- Benchmarking in NYC PowerPoint
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/downloads/ppt/Benchmarking_PPT.pdf\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/downloads/ppt/Benchmarking_PPT.pdf)
- Applicability of Local Law 84
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/downloads/pdf/benchmarking_applicability_exemptions.pdf\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/downloads/pdf/benchmarking_applicability_exemptions.pdf)
- Summary of Local Law 84
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/downloads/pdf/benchmarking_summary_for_website.pdf\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/downloads/pdf/benchmarking_summary_for_website.pdf)
- Environmental Protection Agency ENERGY STAR instructions for NYC
[\[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/downloads/pdf/epa_instructions_on_resubmitting_benchmarking_reports.pdf\]](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/downloads/pdf/epa_instructions_on_resubmitting_benchmarking_reports.pdf)

Seattle

- Benchmarking FAQs
[<http://www.seattle.gov/environment/faqs.htm>]
- Compliance Checklist
[<http://www.seattle.gov/environment/documents/EBR-checklist.pdf>]
- Seattle's How-to Guide
[<http://www.seattle.gov/environment/documents/EBR-how-to-guide.pdf>]
- Director's Rule 6-2011
[<http://www.seattle.gov/environment/documents/EBR-rule-6-2011.pdf>]
- Benchmarking Training Webinar
[<https://energystar.webex.com/cmp0306ld/webcomponents/docshow/docshow.do?siteurl=energystar&setupStatus=1>]
- Utility Automated Benchmarking FAQs
[http://www.seattle.gov/light/accounts/energyusage/docs/Automated_Benchmarking_and_SCL_FAQs.pdf]
- Utility Automated Benchmarking – PSE
[<http://www.pse.com/accountsandservices/PropertyManagers/Pages/Automated-Benchmarking.aspx>]
- Utility Automated Benchmarking – Seattle Steam
[<http://www.seattlesteam.com/automated-benchmark-services.htm>]

ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager Resources

- Benchmarking Starter Kit
[http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=evaluate_performace.bus_portfoliomanager_benchmarking]
- Portfolio Manager Instructional Video
[http://www.energystar.gov/ia/business/benchmarking_training/benchmarking.html]
- Portfolio Manager Reference Guide
[http://www.energystar.gov/ia/business/downloads/PM_QuickRefGuide.pdf?a23e-9428]