September 2026

Presented by AES Peer Group Mentoring Program Working Group:
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Featuring panellists Jill Thomas and Bethany Hansen

Professional isolation in evaluation:

AES members' experiences, and ways to strengthen peer connection and community



AUSTRALIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY

QUALITY EVALUATION
THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Acknowledgement of Country

Why this topic?

You're not the only one in this village.



Professional isolation is feeling isolated in your work for one reason or another.

Evaluation as a career has structural risks for experiencing professional isolation.

So let's talk about it.

Literature shows it’s not just us.

Three root causes of structural professional isolation in evaluation:

1. Evaluation's unsettled status as a profession
2. The institutional isolation of internal and/ or solo evaluators
3. Geographic, cultural and/ or resource-based disconnection

There is recognition of this issue internationally.



And it has real consequences.

There are costs in wellbeing and quality.

Identity crisis:
"Am I an evaluator?"

The "lone ranger"
who lacks a sounding
board or peer community

Weaker methodological
standards, fewer training
pathways, slow discourse
diffusion

Low public legitimacy,
poor status in organisations

Peer Group Mentoring Program participants notice it too.

“I don't think [the mentees] realised they knew as much as they knew, or they were as skilled as they are. Because they’re isolated in their job, they're probably getting more criticism than compliments. **They're not building their professional confidence, because they're isolated.** I think what we did was confirm their level of skill and knowledge, and, gave them some structures to think about their skills and knowledge.” – Mentor, 2021

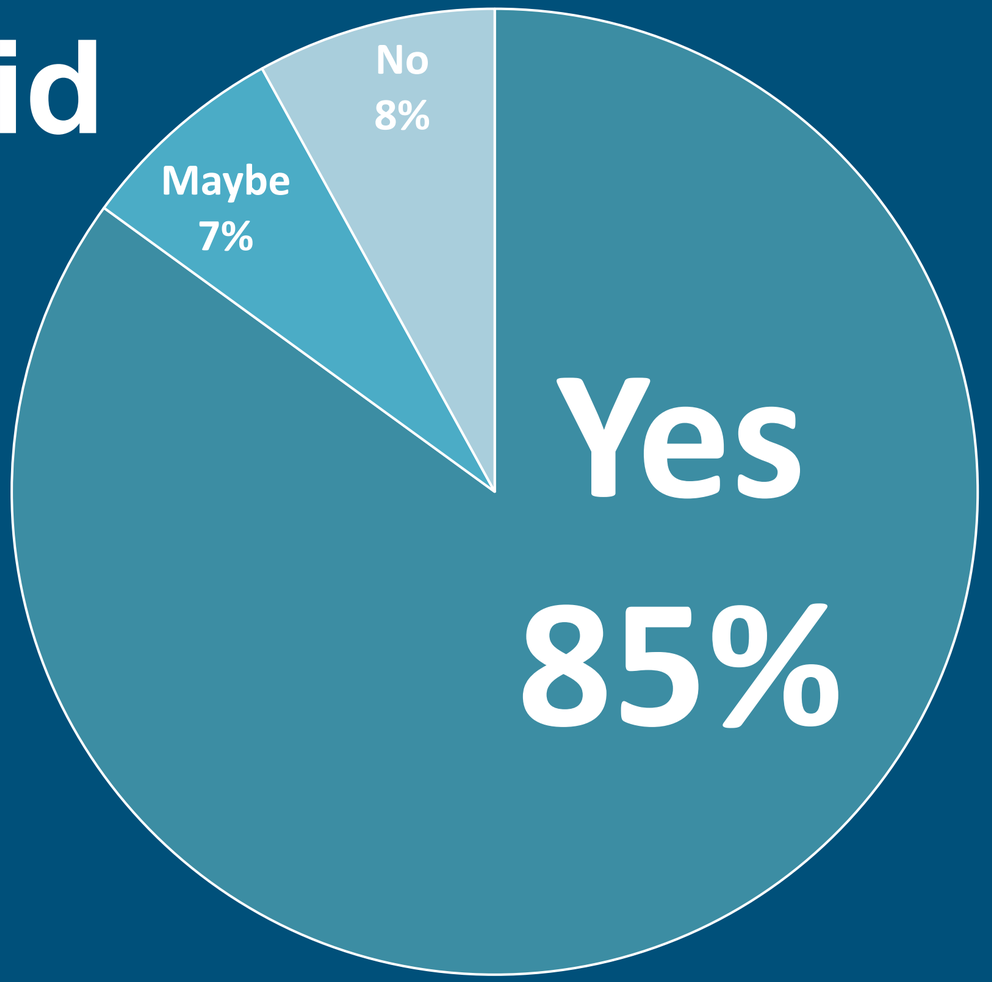
“**It’s that sense of belonging**, you know, you do actually feel like that. You’re developing this network, and even though it’s virtual most of the time, that’s okay.” – Mentee, 2022

Quotes are edited for brevity.

What are some other experiences of professional isolation?

- Quick and dirty survey
- Promoted on LinkedIn in July 2026
- n=61

What proportion of our survey respondents said they had experienced professional isolation as evaluators?



All survey respondents, n=61

Evaluators feel isolated in these contexts…



Base = All respondents n=61

We noticed 3 types of professional isolation:

Structural

"I got a role in a well known national NGO. I discovered when I started that I was 'it', there wasn't a team as such. I found it daunting and lonely - is that the same as isolation?”

Circumstantial

"I am a sole practitioner working in a regional town, so there are very few other evaluators in my region.”

Cultural

"Isolation is a defining feature of the evaluator's landscape, particularly for Indigenous evaluators working within Western colonial systems that often misalign with our ways of thinking and doing.”

Quotes are edited for brevity.

Panellists: What are some of the ways you've seen or experienced professional isolation in evaluation?

Jill Thomas



David Roberts



Bethany Hanson



Your turn: How does this align with your experiences working in evaluation?

Discuss for 5 minutes

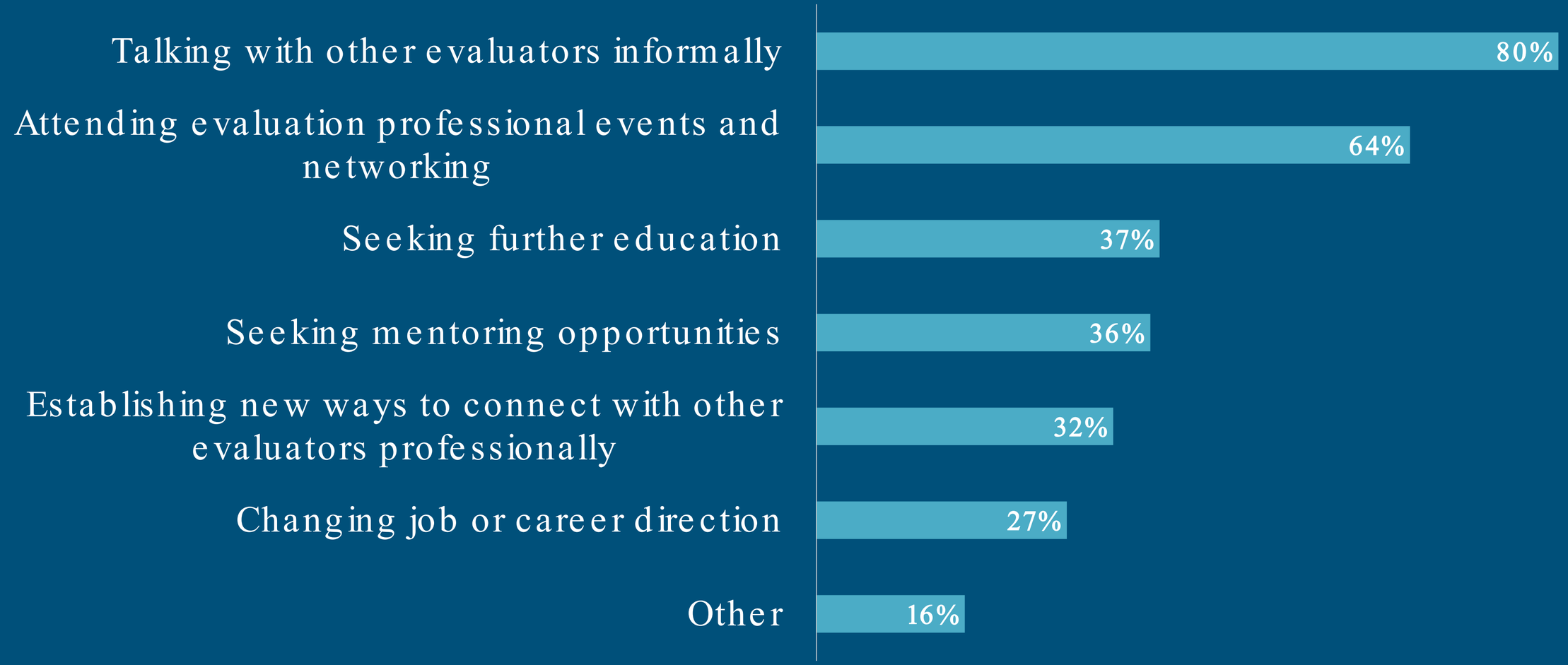
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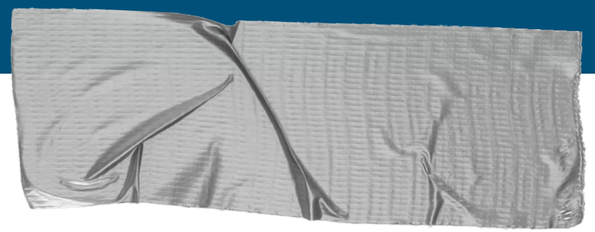
So what can we do that helps?



What has helped you manage professional isolation as an evaluator?



Base = All respondents n=61



What kinds of things help?

- Different things are helpful at different times
- Getting out of the day-to-day – and attend events, including informal ones!
- Talking through the tricky bits helps you find solutions when the work gets hard
- Understanding who is in your network
- Connecting with a range of people – not just at your age and career stage
- Finding ways to feel part of other teams

We all need connection with people who remind us our work is important and needed.

But it’s not always easy to connect.

Sometimes its hard to spend the money needed to connect e.g. to attend a conference

Does competition for scarce work reduce our ability to connect with each other?

No one seemed to have the energy for connection ☹

It can be hard to build and maintain the momentum that staying connected needs

Connection doesn’t have to be complicated.

"I organised a regular gathering for us to come together at the local pub to network and seek support for technical evaluation issues with the local brains trust. I'm passionate about this idea because I have been living this reality for almost a decade and this type of support needs to happen.”

Panellists: What are some ways you've combatted professional isolation as an evaluator?

Jill Thomas



David Roberts



Bethany Hanson



Your turn: How might you reduce the risk of professional isolation for yourself and others?

What are two things you'll do next – for yourself and for others?



Thanks for coming!

Join the AES Peer Group Mentoring Program – next round opens late 2027

Join other AES events

Get in touch with your local Regional Committee for support putting on a local event

Add a new friend on LinkedIn

Reach out to an old or new connection and invite them to a Zoom coffee or wine

Attend a webinar and continue the conversation with someone

Join an online course

Start an interesting discussion on an online platform

Reach out to any of us!!

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