

FROM EXTERNAL TO INTERNAL EVALUATION: A *BOON OR A CURSE*

Introduction

Any transition is fraught with anxiety, tension and new challenges and it is the perspective of the individual towards this change that determines whether it is seen as an opportunity or a constraint. Having been in external evaluation for over a decade, the process of transition to an internal evaluation “avatar”¹ has been an interesting and challenging one. This developmental process has contributed to the emergence of a holistic evaluation persona and opened up a whole new avenue whereby I can persuade the organisation I am working with to take on a more collaborative approach to evaluation.

The Labour Market Policy Group (LMPG), where I am employed, is one of the business units in the Department of Labour, New Zealand. It provides advice and analysis on the operation of the labour market and at the same time offers advisory services to other government departments, especially to Work and Income NZ, Social Policy Agency, Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Corporation and NACEW (National Advisory Council on Employment of Women). Its policy role is supported by its monitoring, research and evaluation activities.

In the evaluation literature, there is a lot of debate about the relative merits of internal evaluation (to ensure buy-in and learning) and external evaluation (to avoid self-interest and capture). LMPG has opted to take a middle ground (internal, yet separate) and in doing so has perhaps found a useful and workable compromise (State services Commission, 1999). I label this role as a “quasi-internal” role as it synthesises many functions traditionally associated with internal and external evaluation. The term describes the scenario where the evaluator within the policy unit plans and designs the overall evaluation strategy but contracts out specific parts due to constraints in time and resources.

Evaluations can be carried out by a range of actors. It can be conducted internally in the administration, externally by independent organisations or as in the case of LMPG, by a mixture of actors. The degree to which these actors can be labeled internal or external or in my view “quasi-internal” depends on one’s perspective. Increasingly, evaluators within policy groups such as LMPG act as evaluation planners and managers. This “quasi-internal” role has two functions:

- to set out procedures for research design, data collection and analysis for evaluation which is then carried out by external evaluation agencies
- to prepare and synthesise evaluation findings in a form which is useable to the policy team to assure “ the transmission of social knowledge from the point of origin to the point of use in the policy process” (Sundquist, 1978).

It is this role that presents the biggest challenge to me. The tasks include persuading the policy team and other stakeholders of the value of evaluation; clarifying its contribution to policy advice; and bringing new findings to the attention of policy makers in a language that allows their significance to be understood and interpreting their significance. These tasks add a new dimension to the way in which I have been looking at the world of evaluation. It also necessitates an in-depth understanding and appreciation of the way in which evaluation activities are organised in the public sector.

Role of Evaluation in Public Sector

Evaluation is commonly described as part of an overall cycle of policy analysis and advice, often portrayed graphically as a circle (Turner, 1999). The elements of that cycle typically includes the following in some form:

- problem definition
- policy development
- implementation
- evaluation and
- new analysis and policy development.

The cyclical view of the policy process emphasises the backward looking role of evaluation, stressing the need to assess how policies and programmes have worked in practice. While this **ex-post** role is the most common one for evaluators, evaluation skills and techniques applied at any time during the policy process can make a valuable contribution to the quality of policy advice. This **ex-ante** role is a process to which a person in my capacity can make a significant contribution. By building evaluation criteria into policy proposals and forcing a focus on objectives and outcomes sought early on in the process, there is a concerted attempt to enhance the overall quality of the evaluation and policy analysis.

In my view, a firm grounding in external evaluation strengthens the evaluator's ability and skill in responding to the demands of the emerging "quasi-internal" role. The experience gained by working on a wide range of projects with varying levels of complexity and clarifying goals with programme officials provide a strong foundation for tracing programme logic processes. Often, "quasi-internal" evaluators in similar capacity limit their involvement to supervising projects and rely heavily on the external evaluator to provide guidance and advice every step of the way. In my case, my external evaluation experience drives me to play more than a supervisory role while undertaking evaluation, which has led to a spurt in collaborative evaluation projects within the group.

MAKING THE TRANSITION :*Quasi-internal role*

As mentioned earlier, the “quasi-internal” evaluator combines both evaluation planning and management skills as well as project administration skills. Consequently, the role encompasses a range of activities:

- planning for evaluation in development of new policy
- initiating a range of studies to answer question about program/policy
- collaborating with external evaluators to conduct studies
- feeding results of evaluation into subsequent policy developmental process
- reviewing evaluations and examining for scope to improve utility and quality of future evaluation projects.

In performing each of these roles, past experiences as an external evaluator adds a distinctive edge. For instance, in my role within LMPG, I am responsible for evaluating the impact of the accident insurance reforms. The evaluation strategy encompasses many; smaller evaluation projects of varying complexities and scales spread over a three-year period. The evaluation strategy uses a judicious mix of external evaluators and in house monitoring to provide a balanced assessment of the impact of the reforms. The fulfillment in this role comes from the fact that being part of the system, there is an opportunity to play a wide range of roles within a project, which would have been out of bounds as an external evaluator. There is an opportunity to undertake data analysis, monitoring, interviewing, policy development work and write recommendations on evaluation projects for the stakeholders.

Consequently, there is a knowledge build up that happens and it is possible to look at the entire breadth of data gathered from various projects to build theory about what is happening at workplaces. One of my frustrations as an external evaluator has often been the client’s reticence in providing the complete picture, which in turn affected my efficiency and effectiveness as an external evaluator.

Managing evaluation projects

Evaluation projects are managed to accomplish three purposes:

- to ensure useful questions are asked that will give stakeholders the information they need when they need it
- to ensure that appropriate research methods are used for each project

- to allow for continuous improvement of evaluations as projects follow a well-defined process allowing for lessons to be learnt from experience.

In my recent experience in working on the evaluation of the accident insurance reforms, the external evaluation experience has helped iron out some of these issues at very early stages of the project. On going consultation with stakeholders to steer the evaluation to ask useful questions has been initiated even before writing the terms of references. In consultation with policy teams, program logic processes were followed with the explicit objective of building outcome hierarchies with short and long-term objectives. As an external evaluator, one develops a certain amount of rigour in methodology and analysis and with the switch to the “quasi-internal” role, there is greater opportunity to integrate the use of scientific methods with pragmatic solutions to policy concerns.

Building a collaborative approach to evaluation

In LMPG, there is tremendous opportunity to undertake collaborative evaluation as the department has sought to take a middle ground thereby placing some distance between the programmes and policies being evaluated. Using a collaborative approach to evaluation in one of my projects has been of immense value to the department as a whole and me personally. Participating in the case study interviews and the subsequent brainstorming sessions with the external evaluation team, not as a client, but as a core research member provided valuable insights into the analytical processes. As a result, there is greater ownership of the findings and enhanced ability to triangulate findings of one study with other smaller pieces of work within the broader evaluation strategy. Hence, a project is not seen as a stand-alone entity but as a jigsaw piece in the puzzle of evaluating program intervention.

Why is this shift a boon?

My experience as an external evaluator offers tremendous value additions both to me personally as well as to the department. While it has given me an opportunity to explore the other side of evaluation, it provides the department the advantage of my range of skills and experience. It is also my personal view that my grounding in external evaluation enables me to contribute to the organisation in several ways, some of which are discussed below.

Act as a change agent: One of the positive aspects of moving to a “quasi-internal” role is the flexibility it offers in developing and structuring evaluation activities to complement a change oriented approach to the evaluation process. Evaluation generated information often competes with other data available to decision-makers (Sonnichesen, 1994). The advantages of being on the inside are the possibility to increase the likelihood that evaluation data will compete successfully in this environment. One of the most effective means for evaluators to achieve this change is by writing recommendations to

accompany evaluation reports. My openness to undertake a collaborative approach to evaluation projects combined with my external evaluation experience enhances my ability to function as a link between evaluation findings and the organisation thereby activating internal debate and discussions on findings.

Promote a culture of organisational learning: Learning organisations allocate resources to study trends and unfolding patterns which makes them better equipped to deal with risks and uncertainties. Department of Labour has an expressed commitment to use evaluations to become a *learning* organisation:

- learning about the context and other organisations we deal with
- learning how to improve what we do
- learning whether the things we do are indeed the things we should be doing

As an evaluator within this group, there is opportunity to promote reflective practice by looking beyond the traditional focus on individual programmes (Turner, 1998). Other ways in which use of evaluation results can be improved are:

- ensuring that a comprehensive set of perspectives are brought in to bear in planning evaluation strategies
- using a wider range of evaluation methods to tap into different parts of the system
- clearer communication and reporting of evaluation findings
- building an institutional memory.

The continuous and on going contact with policy and program staff provides an in-depth understanding of organisational objectives and activities and inspires trust in and thus increased influence of the evaluator (Rossi and Freeman, 1993). The learning attitude, further, contributes to building an evaluation culture as the department supports and encourages innovation and adaptation to a changing environment. The key message is to promote a culture of continuous learning. An external evaluation experience brings a range of experiences, which the policy unit can benefit from.

Credibility: Credibility of the internal evaluator is probably the singlemost important component in determining the success of internal evaluation activities. Perceptions of organisations are affected by the reputation of evaluators, their skill and experience and their ability to maintain objectivity. However, when one is performing a “quasi-internal” role, the credibility factor is less of a problem as the evaluators are regarded as specialists and knowledgeable about the methods. This is particularly significant for LMPG as the group often does quality assurance checks on work undertaken by other government departments. Acceptance of the advice and appreciation comes from the evaluator’s range of experiences and his/her ability to add value rather than merely critique the project.

A cross-cultural orientation: Coming from a multi cultural country like India, there is an innate recognition and appreciation of the diversity in social systems across various cultural groups. This is a boon in New Zealand which despite its BI-cultural foundation, is fast becoming a multi-cultural nation. The burgeoning ethnic diversity places demands on evaluation to factor this element into each phase of the evaluation process. It also raises a debate as to whether a positivist paradigm or a naturalistic paradigm is better equipped to provide answers to the key evaluation questions (Cuthbert 1984).

Here is an illustration as to how this orientation adds value. As part of the accident insurance claims data, there is a requirement to collect ethnicity-related information on injured workers. During discussions on why it was important to collect this information, many stated that it was important for understanding how accidents are spread across ethnic groups. To me, the underlying issue is more significant. There is an immediate recognition that different ethnic groups respond differently to rehabilitation efforts and so knowing which ethnic group an injured person belongs to, enables the insurers develop rehabilitation or return to work programmes which is culturally sensitive and appropriate. As a result, involving the family or the community in rehabilitation of Maori or the Pacific Islander or even an Asian will probably yield faster recovery as opposed to dealing with the worker in isolation.

Buying evaluation capability more intelligently: My role at LMPG involves contracting external evaluators to undertake some components of the overall evaluation plan. This is done formally through a contracting process whereby external evaluators are asked to respond with a proposal outlining the methodology and work plan for the study. An external evaluation past facilitates in this decision making and helps the “quasi-internal” evaluator be an informed purchaser. It also makes them sensitive to time frames and the external evaluator’s need to occasionally cut corners!

Why is this shift a curse?

Risk of legitimisation evaluation: Evaluation initiatives undertaken by an in house unit runs the risk of being steered by the perspectives of the primary stakeholders. Managing the tensions between the decision-maker’s need to lend legitimacy for on going programmes and the evaluator’s own need to provide credible results pose a huge dilemma. Extra caution is needed to ensure that the evaluation is not used to reflect any hidden agenda or only one viewpoint.

Lag between political time and evaluation time: Evaluations take time, especially those that are directed at assessing programme impact (Rossi and Freeman, 1993). However, the political world moves at a much faster pace and government officials are impatient to know whether or not their policy

is achieving its goals and their time frames are in months, not years. This places pressures on the evaluator to provide “rapid feedback” and “impressions” of impact, which can often skew the picture.

Conclusion

Clearly, the positives of this shift outweigh the negatives. In my view, external evaluation experience adds tremendous value to the way in which organisations can be made to look at evaluations and instill an innate respect for the discipline. It also develops a more pragmatic attitude to the evaluation process. Consequently, it would be worthwhile to consider external evaluation experience as criteria when building an internal evaluation team.

My transition from outsider to insider has not been an easy one. However, given my relative newness to the public policy context in New Zealand, it has been easier for me to provide a critique of existing practices as I am still, in a manner of speaking, an “outsider”. In the interim, I am using this shift to the inside as an opportunity and as a tool to build new alliances and relationships for future change as an insider.

¹ “avatar” meaning incarnation

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