"Lessons learned - Reflections on a training evaluation"

A paper presented at the 2003 AES International Conference in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

by Sandra Stopher (Centrelink Virtual College)

Abstract

What is "Centrelink"?
Centrelink is in the top one hundred of Australian companies in terms of size and turnover. Its recurrent budget is $1.6 billion and it distributes $44 billion in social security payments on behalf of the Department of Family and Community Services.

Centrelink:

- ⇨ *has 6.3 million customers;*
- ⇨ *pays 9.3 million individual entitlements each year;*
- ⇨ *has 24 356 staff;*
- ⇨ *has more than 1 000 service delivery points ranging from large Customer Service Centres to small visiting services;*
- ⇨ *sends more than 97 million letters to customers each year;*
- ⇨ *conducts 98 700 field officer reviews each year;*
- ⇨ *has more than 650 000 booked office appointments each month;*
- ⇨ *handles 5.2 million new claims each year;*
- ⇨ *receives more than 22 million telephone calls each year;*
- ⇨ *receives 9 million website page views each year;*
- ⇨ *makes some 700 000 decisions weekly.*

Information sourced from the Centrelink Annual Report 2000-2001 and Centrelink Information 2001-2002.

Recently, Centrelink implemented the initial stages of the Government's Australians Working Together (AWT) package, one of the biggest initiatives in the organisation's history. Part of this project included the training of 450 staff for the new position of Personal Adviser (PA). The effective training of these staff was integral to the successful implementation of AWT. A comprehensive evaluation of the training program was planned and implemented, providing a unique opportunity for Centrelink to centrally co-ordinate the evaluation of a national training program.

Due to logistical factors, the evaluation as implemented varied from the evaluation as planned. This paper examines some of the challenges encountered in designing and implementing the evaluation and also discusses alternatives which, in hindsight, may have made the process easier. It also highlights the differences between the evaluation as planned and the evaluation as implemented and discussses some of the reasons for these differences. In essence, it looks at some of the questions raised when evaluating training programs within a large organisation and the impact of external factors on an evaluation's implementation.

For a Glossary of Terms, please refer to Appendix A.

Background

The *Australians Working Together* (AWT) package is part of the Australian Federal Government's Welfare Reform initiative. This package was developed, in large part, as a response to the report *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society* [Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 2000]. This report identified ways in which the Government's delivery of social security payments and services could be made more participation-focussed and enable payment recipients to become more empowered through the participation process.

A major component of *Australians Working Together* was the creation of a new position called a "Personal Adviser" (PA). This new position was integral to the national implementation of AWT and initially required the recruitment and training of some 450 staff. These new PAs received twelve weeks' intensive training and were also required to undertake the Certificate IV in Community Services (Information, Advice and Referral), a tailor-made accredited learning program, within their first twelve months on the job. This twelve week learning program was developed by Centrelink's Registered Training Organisation, the Centrelink Virtual College (CVC).

Centrelink's client departments DEWR (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations) and DFaCS (Department of Family and Community Services) were keenly interested in the creation of this new position, due in large part to the amount of funding support provided by each of these departments for training. The CVC was committed to assuring both DEWR and DFaCS of their committment to quality training so, as part of the training strategy for this learning program, it was determined that the Virtual College would undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the PA learning program. An evaluation strategy was developed and instruments designed (an outline of the original methodology for this evaluation can be found at Appendix A).

Methodology as planned

The evaluation was originally designed to be implemented in three phases and focussed on answering the following questions:-

1. Has the Personal Adviser learning program been implemented as planned?
2. Have the learning outcomes of the program been achieved?
3. Have the learning needs of staff been met by the program?
4. Has the transference of learning achieved desirable levels of customer service?

The evaluation was designed to be both an objectives-based and needs-based evaluation i.e. it would measure effectiveness against learning outcomes as well as against the actual needs of the participants (these learning needs were to be established summatively to identify possible areas where reinforcement training was required).

There were three main areas of focus for the evaluation of the Personal Adviser Learning Program:-

⇨ Individual sessions;
⇨ Facilitation; and
⇨ Overall program.

Areas of focus

Individual sessions

The instruments to evaluate individual sessions were to be question and answer sessions, a Learning Journal, an observer checklist and the assessment tools from individual learning sessions.

Facilitator evaluation

The instruments used to evaluate Facilitator effectiveness were to be a learner assessment questionnaire (which were to be incorporated into a pre-/post-test) and a Facilitator Self-Assessment.

Overall program

In order to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Personal Adviser Learning Program, data from a number of sources was to be used:-

✧ cumulative data from previous sessions' testing;
✧ system-based questionnaire;
✧ staff focus groups;
✧ random samples of learning journals;
✧ external customer surveys;
✧ Staff and Customer "Value Creation Workshops" (including consultation with internal and external stakeholders);
✧ assessment results (competent / non-competent data); and
✧ observations, by team leaders & subject matter experts, of on-the-job transference of learning.

Timing of evaluation

As previously mentioned, the Personal Adviser learning program evaluation was originally designed to take place in three stages:-

⇨ Evaluation integrated into learning program (ie during implementation);
⇨ Six weeks post-implementation; and
⇨ Twelve weeks post-implementation.

It was also recommended that a further post-implementation evaluation be conducted at six months post-program to further determine transference and decay rates. *A Gantt chart showing the orignal timeline proposed for the evaluation can be found at Appendix B.*

Methodology as implemented

Due to a number of factors impacting on the evaluation (which will be detailed later in this paper), the PA Learning Program Evaluation as implemented varied from the process described in the *Australians Working Together* Personal Adviser Learning Program Evaluation Strategy.

While the original evaluation design involved a three phase approach, the process actually implemented was as follows:-

⇨ <u>Phase One</u>

included the following instruments:-

* Learning Journal (data collection ongoing & not analysed as part of this phase);
* PA Post-learning Questionnaire; and
* PA Program Evaluation Feedback Sheet.

Phase Two

included the following instruments:-

* Personal Adviser Self Assessment;
* Learning Journal data analysis;
* Personal Adviser questionnaire; and
* Customer feedback / Customer Value Creation Workshop data.

One major change was the fact that evaluation data was not collected concurrently with delivery of the learning program. As such, all evaluation data was collected post-delivery. The data collected was aimed at determining the relevance of the Personal Adviser Learning Program to the 'on-the-job' performance of the Personal Advisers in the network based on the initial months of the learning participants commencing work as PAs.

A Gantt chart showing the timeline for the evaluation as implemented can be found at Appendix C while a more detailed description of the evaluation instruments can be found at Appendix D.

Main factors which impacted on the implementation of the original evaluation design

There were a number of factors which impacted on the development and delivery of the PA Learning Program and, consequently, on the implementation of the original PA learning evaluation design. The majority of these were external to the CVC however some were internal.

Factors external to the CVC which impacted on the evaluation:-

- the learning program was still being developed while it was being implemented, primarily as a result of ongoing changes to the program content by client departments (as the PA position was newly created, some of the legislation and policy governing the role was still being finalised throughout the development of the program);
- delay in the registration of the Certificate IV qualification by ANTA - this meant that links to competency, and assessment activities relating to these competencies, could not be included in the learning program;
- a Post-Implementation Review (PIR) of the Personal Adviser implementation process was commissioned by the *Australians Working Together* project team. The timing of this PIR coincided with the timing of the evaluation and this meant that a number of evaluative instruments duplicated the process undertaken as part of the PIR (particularly Focus Groups). As such, it was decided not to conduct Staff Focus Groups as this would place additional stress on the Personal Advisers in their 'settling in' period and which could also lead to duplication of data;
- some of the new computer systems designed to support Personal Advisers did not function reliably upon their commencement on-the-job. As a result, a high proportion of responses to the initial evaluation instruments related to a need for additional systems training in other computer applications which should not have had to be used by PAs. This skewed the results, for the first phase of the evaluation in particular, towards a need for additional systems training;
- budgetary constraints regarding evaluation costs - funding to the CVC for training evaluation purposes was limited which effected the ability of the College to implement certain evaluative instruments; and
- the Customer Value Creation Workshop (VCW) relating to Personal Advisers was still being developed at the time when the PA program evaluation was being undertaken. After consideration of the timeframes involved, and consultation with the Centrelink Virtual College, it was decided that this data would be considered as a supplement to the formal evaluation. This would enable a clearer determination of the impact of the PA Learning Program on customer service delivery.

Factors internal to the CVC which impacted on the Personal Adviser evaluation:-

- the PA learning program did not include evaluative instruments designed for delivery as part of the training; and
- initially, there was some ambiguity about responsibilities of CVC staff in relation to the PA program evaluation.

The three primary factors which impacted most on the implementation of the evaluation process were the exclusion of evaluative instruments from the learning program itself, the changing nature of the learning program and the fact that the computer applications designed to support the PAs did not function as planned upon the Personal Advisers' commencement on the job.

Comparison of evaluation as planned with evaluation as implemented

The main ways in which the evaluation as implemented varied from the evaluation as planned was the omission of Phase One (data collection during the delivery of the learning program) and the fact that Focus Groups were not used as a data collection method.

"Lessons learned"

The PA Learning Program Evaluation was one of the first nation-wide evaluations undertaken by the Centrelink Virtual College. While the evaluation did not go as originally planned, it still collected valuable information regarding the effectiveness of the Personal Adviser Learning Program and contributed directly to the development of future PA training. It identified areas within the learning program which needed further attention and also showed that there were training sessions which did not need any improvement.

The evaluation was also a developmental process for the evaluator, highlighting ways in which the evaluation process could have been improved.

Some tips for inexperienced evaluators when evaluating training:-

- ✓ Make sure all stakeholders (including the evaluator) are clear about their roles in the evaluation;
- ✓ Ensure you have access to all timelines / deadlines for training development;
- ✓ If possible, have access to the final training program prior to development of the evaluation strategy;
- ✓ Consider the impact of external factors (for example, systems failure, quality of facilitation) on your data;
- ✓ Manage the evaluation process closely;
- ✓ Always focus on the utilisation of data - all evaluation data should be collected with a purpose in mind (there is no point collecting large amounts of data which will not measure what needs to be measured!);
- ✓ Always communicate closely with stakeholders, particularly the stakeholder(s) commisioning the evaluation, throughout the evaluation process; and
- ✓ Be flexible - particularly in a large organisation, things will not always go to plan and there will almost always be external variables which will impact on the implementation of your evaluation.

References

Reference Group on Welfare Reform *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society (aka "The McClure Report")* [http://www.facs.gov.au/welfare_reform_final/home.htm; DFaCS; 2000]

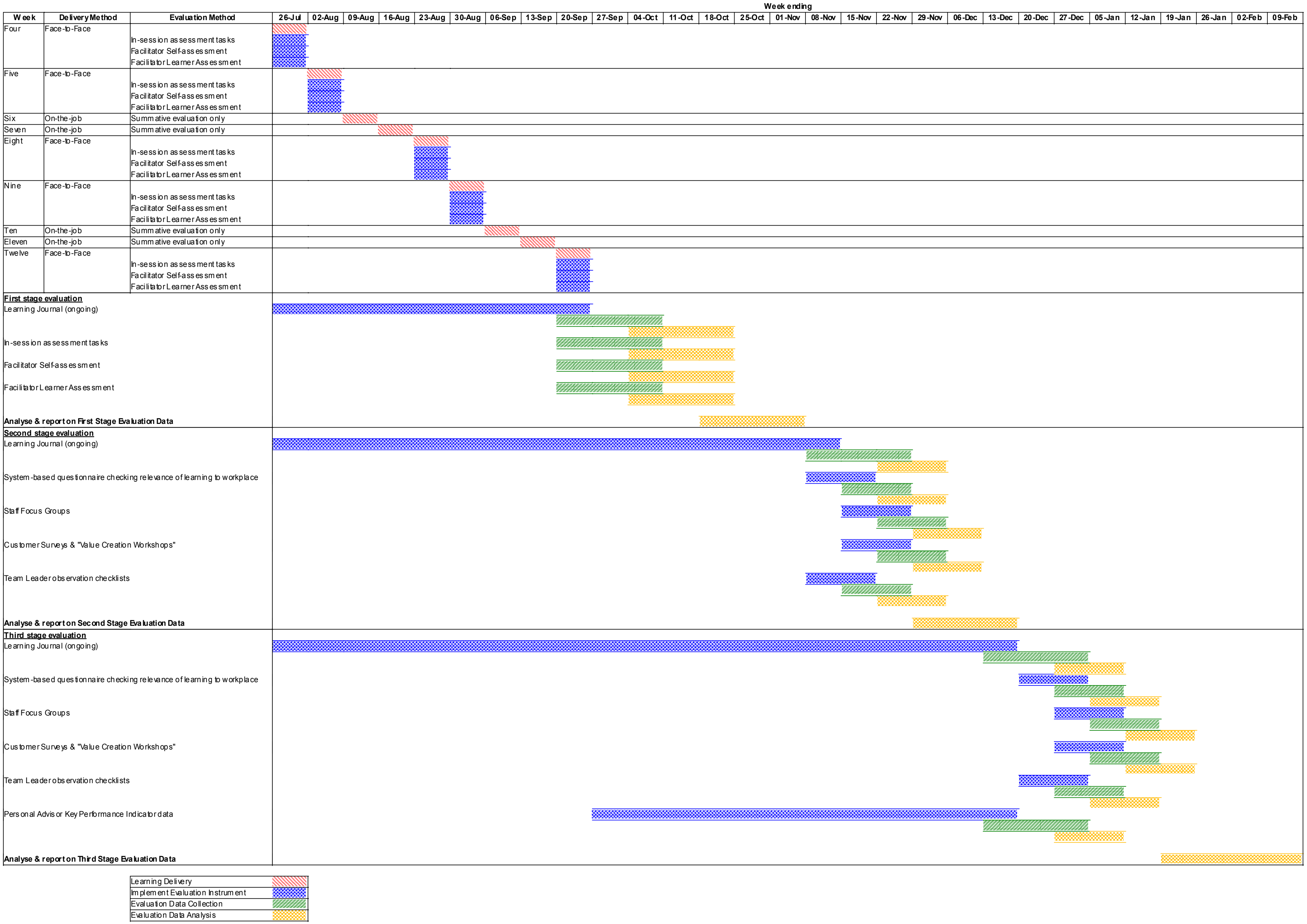
Centrelink internal reports, including:-

- *Australians Working Together* Personal Adviser Learning Program Strategy
- *Australians Working Together* Personal Adviser Learning Program Evaluation Strategy
- *Australians Working Together* Training Strategy
- *Australians Working Together* Personal Adviser Learning Program Evaluation Phase One Report
- *Australians Working Together* Personal Adviser Learning Program Evaluation Phase Two Report

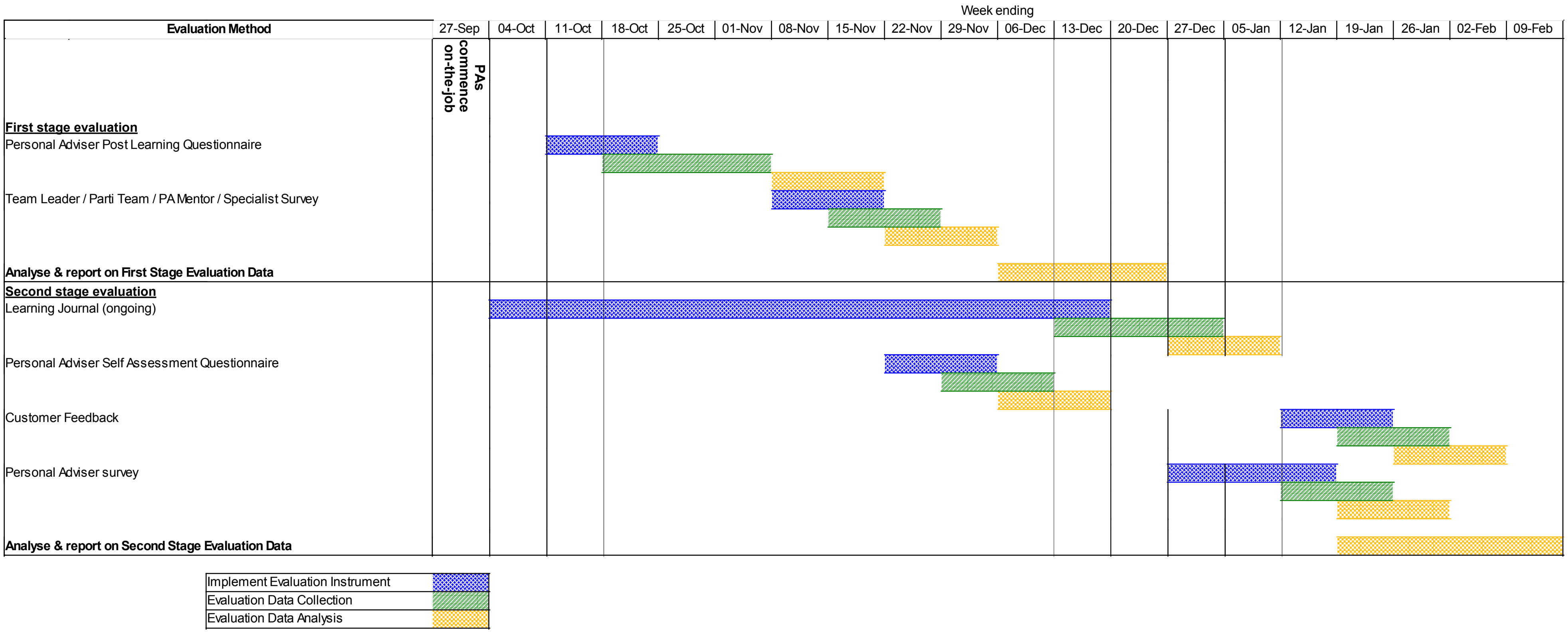
Glossary of Terms

AWT	*Australians Working Together* - an initiative of the Australian Federal Government in response to the report "Participation Support for a More Equitable Society"
Centrelink	Centrelink is a Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency delivering a range of Commonwealth services to the Australian community on behalf of its client departments, including DFaCS and DEWR
DFaCS	Department of Family and Community Services - this department is responsible for a broad range of social policy issues affecting Australian society and the living standards of Australian families, communities and individuals.
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations - this department develops and implements policies and programmes that support an effectively functioning labour market, and workplaces with higher productivity and higher pay
CVC	Centrelink Virtual College (Centrelink's Registered Training Organisation) - established in April 2001, the CVC provides a focal point for learning within Centrelink
Centrelink client departments	Commonwealth Departments which allow Centrelink to delivery their services on their behalf
Value Creation Workshop	The Value Creation Workshop (VCW) is a structured, facilitated feedback forum which involves both: customers of a service; and the providers of the service.

Appendix B


Week ending
Week
Delivery Method
Evaluation Method
26-Jul
02-Aug
09-Aug
16-Aug
23-Aug
30-Aug
06-Sep
13-Sep
20-Sep
27-Sep
04-Oct
11-Oct
18-Oct
25-Oct
01-Nov
08-Nov
15-Nov
22-Nov
29-Nov
06-Dec
13-Dec
20-Dec
27-Dec
05-Jan
12-Jan
19-Jan
26-Jan
02-Feb
09-Feb
Four
Face-to-Face
In-session assessment tasks
Facilitator Self-assessment
Facilitator Learner Assessment
Five
Face-to-Face
In-session assessment tasks
Facilitator Self-assessment
Facilitator Learner Assessment
Six
On-the-job
Summative evaluation only
Seven
On-the-job
Summative evaluation only
Eight
Face-to-Face
In-session assessment tasks
Facilitator Self-assessment
Facilitator Learner Assessment
Nine
Face-to-Face
In-session assessment tasks
Facilitator Self-assessment
Facilitator Learner Assessment
Ten
On-the-job
Summative evaluation only
Eleven
On-the-job
Summative evaluation only
Twelve
Face-to-Face
In-session assessment tasks
Facilitator Self-assessment
Facilitator Learner Assessment
First stage evaluation
Learning Journal (ongoing)
In-session assessment tasks
Facilitator Self-assessment
Facilitator Learner Assessment
Analyse & report on First Stage Evaluation Data
Second stage evaluation
Learning Journal (ongoing)
System-based questionnaire checking relevance of learning to workplace
Staff Focus Groups
Customer Surveys & "Value Creation Workshops"
Team Leader observation checklists
Analyse & report on Second Stage Evaluation Data
Third stage evaluation
Learning Journal (ongoing)
System-based questionnaire checking relevance of learning to workplace
Staff Focus Groups
Customer Surveys & "Value Creation Workshops"
Team Leader observation checklists
Personal Advisor Key Performance Indicator data
Analyse & report on Third Stage Evaluation Data
Learning Delivery
Implement Evaluation Instrument
Evaluation Data Collection
Evaluation Data Analysis

Appendix C


Week ending
Evaluation Method
27-Sep
04-Oct
11-Oct
18-Oct
25-Oct
01-Nov
08-Nov
15-Nov
22-Nov
29-Nov
06-Dec
13-Dec
20-Dec
27-Dec
05-Jan
12-Jan
19-Jan
26-Jan
02-Feb
09-Feb
PAs commence on-the-job
First stage evaluation
Personal Adviser Post Learning Questionnaire
Team Leader / Parti Team / PA Mentor / Specialist Survey
Analyse & report on First Stage Evaluation Data
Second stage evaluation
Learning Journal (ongoing)
Personal Adviser Self Assessment Questionnaire
Customer Feedback
Personal Adviser survey
Analyse & report on Second Stage Evaluation Data
Implement Evaluation Instrument
Evaluation Data Collection
Evaluation Data Analysis

Instrument description

Personal Adviser Self Assessment Questionnaire

PAs were sent a detailed self-assessment questionnaire, via email, to help measure the level of retention of knowledge post-training, the transference of learning to the workplace and to identify any areas where further improvement is required. This questionnaire was created in two parts (Part One, which consisted of customer service-based tasks, and Part Two, which consisted of system-based tasks) and asked PAs to rate their ability to perform a series of tasks identified as being part of the day-to-day role of a Personal Adviser.

Personal Adviser Learning Journal

A Learning Journal was created as a critical reflection exercise for Personal Advisers. All PAs were encouraged to complete the Learning Journal on an ongoing basis and were asked to provide copies of the completed journal, if they so wished, to be incorporated into the Evaluation.

Personal Adviser Post-learning Questionnaire

Phase One of the Personal Adviser Learning Program Evaluation included a post-learning questionnaire which was sent to all PAs soon after they commenced in the PA role asking for their responses on issues regarding the learning program and its effectiveness. In order to better measure the relevance of the learning program to the PA role, an abbreviated version of this questionnaire was sent to PAs as part of Phase Two of the PA Evaluation.

This format was used to enable responses to these questions to be compared with responses to the same questions in the Phase One questionnaire. This comparison assisted in determining if PAs' opinions of the learning program changed once they had the benefit of further experience in the PA role. Responses to these questions in the Phase One survey indicated that it was possible that external variables (i.e. system problems) may have impacted on the responses received. The timing of the second questionnaire was designed to help counteract these external variables and allowed a more accurate reflection of the PA learning program.

AWT Participation Value Creation Workshops

The Value Creation Team, in consultation with Centrelink's client departments, developed a Value Creation Workshop to measure customers' satisfaction with the service provided by Personal Advisers as part of the implementation of AWT. Originally, Focus Groups (with both PAs and customers) were to be held as part of the evaluation however, as the AWT Training Evaluation Co-ordinator was directly involved in the development of the instrument used for this workshop, separate Focus Groups were not considered necessary. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing nature of the AWT Participation VCWs, the final data from this instrument was not available for inclusion in the final evaluation report however it was recommended that this information be viewed by interested stakeholders when available as it will provide a detailed indication of the impact of the learning program on organisational results and customer service delivery.