

Improving Practices to Create Value for Clients: A Consultant's View on the Project Lifecycle

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Introduction

At the 2007 Australian Evaluation Society conference, Roberts Evaluation submitted an interactive poster titled *Getting The Most From Your Consultant* incorporating perspectives from consultants and clients. The key to an effective relationship was shown to be having clearly defined goals, proper resourcing, commitment from the client and the consultant, alternative approaches and solutions, and participatory approaches to recommendations. While this is useful for maximising the added value for the given terms of reference of an evaluation, the terms themselves ought to be discussed in the project building stages for maximising the value of the project – not just the evaluation. This paper discusses practical methods for improving the value of consultants using a ‘whole of project’ perspective rather than the tradition ‘whole of evaluation’.

Know Your Consultants

To fully appreciate the role that evaluators can provide in project management and support services, it is important to know your consultants. Knowing the capabilities and scope of consultants will enable the client to use them more comprehensively throughout the project cycle, in addition to the more traditional ex-post evaluations. Experience has shown that utilising evaluators for problem analysis, developing the program logic, risk analysis, action planning and ex-ante evaluations can improve the project management throughout the project, however often the planning and designing is not considered as a skill of the evaluator or required from the evaluator. This is a duality problem: on the one hand, evaluators do not appropriately communicate their skills, abilities and the role they play; and on the other hand, clients often aren't aware nor do they seek this information.

Moreover, good consultants are innovative in their approaches. They will utilise methodologies from one study area and apply it to another area, they will develop and evolve methodologies and techniques to suit different circumstances that arise. This process can be facilitated through clients being willing to take on risk with consultations. This may be a willingness to trial a new technique that their organisation has not utilised previously, or to trial consultants from areas that may seem non-traditional. Alternatively, structuring the terms of reference to prescribe outputs (questions you want answered) rather than inputs (methodologies to use) can

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facilitate more innovative approaches. Furthermore, experience is important, but often organisations go to the same methodologies or consultants – be willing to consider good methodologies over experience, as the gamut information you receive will differ to help decision making from different perspectives.

Build Partnerships

Consultants and project managers have mutual interest in the success of the project, and thus the incentives exist for there to be effort and good relationships. There ought to be mutual obligations and commitments by both parties, such that the work is not a client-provider relationship, but more of a partnership. Where possible, build and develop these partnerships.

For example, the scope and terms of reference of an evaluation is often considered as the contract. But in a good partnership, this ought not be developed by one actor and implemented by the other – it should be co-developed in collaboration. Often the scope of tenders are altered after the evaluation has begun, or the scope is not comprehensive and does not provide all the answers that the client wants or needs. It is beneficial for both the client and the consultant to consider the initial terms of reference as a guiding document, flexible enough to accept improvements. Better yet, if possible develop the terms of reference together. Think about the questions that are to be answered, write the brief accordingly to select a methodology together to enact this brief.

The Journey

Undertaking an evaluation is a journey for both client and consultant. It begins with pre-planning and consideration of terms of reference, and often ends with a report with recommendations or lessons or observations of impacts. However, there are numerous steps along the journey to get to that end point. Too frequently these are lonely steps along the journey, and arriving at the end point is fraught with danger around questions “What if this isn’t what the client wants?”. Being involved throughout the process will help guide the evaluation to ensure that both the client and consultant is aware of things if they are going awry. Be involved in the questionnaire writing, make sure it answers the right questions, consider what is being asked, and ensure the report reflects that is needed.

The Beginning to the End of the Project Cycle

As consultants, all too often we are called in at the end-game to evaluate what has already taken place and restricted in what can be changed. If the consultant can be involved from the beginning of the project cycle, then the value of an evaluation can be increased. Experience of evaluators and project managers alike have demonstrated that spending time and effort in pre-project planning and design phases can avert issues and improve the results-based management. However, it can be difficult to utilise consultants before a project budget has been allocated – this is often the case with Government clientele and the like, whereby the

complicated funding / budgetary cycles means that funding is only available once the project is planned and a logical framework has been developed.

There are several methods that can be incorporated into project management to overcome these funding issues. Placing consultants on retainers uses core non-discretionary funding of budget allocations, and not project specific funding. This would enable a program group to utilise the consultants prior to budget allocations for the pre-planning. Retainers can be structured in several different methods, the strength being that they provide flexibility for the client to use the skills and expertise when required without the constraints of formal agreements for each request. This reduces the transaction cost of receiving advice, meaning that external advice is more likely to be sought.

Alternatively, if formal contractual arrangements are not possible, building relationships with consultants (many are on preferred tender lists for larger organisations) and asking in good faith for assistance in the pre-planning would generally be positively received. Otherwise, utilising the lessons learned and recommendations from previous evaluations is free, but can provide many useful insights – this is more important for larger organisations where in house forums have greater potential for cross agency learnings.

Timelines and Budgets

It is understood that what is needed, is not always affordable. Therefore, it is important to prioritise. Naturally, clients want the most they can get for their money, but this can be confused with quantity rather than quality. If not all the questions can be answered, answer a few questions properly rather than asking for more. It is the consultants role to advise on this – for example, if figures are not statistically significant because they have been spread too thinly, this should be noted up front during discussions of the methodology.

Timelines can also be a significant constraint. Ex-post evaluations ought not creep up on a project manager; plan appropriately and ensure the consultant has a sufficient amount of time leading in to the evaluation and to conduct the evaluation for them to be able to provide the most. Experience has shown that often evaluations are conducted to feed into an analogous process, however insufficient time is provided as much time is required for tender processes, selecting consultants, pre-planning, etc. It's up to consultant to inform generally about the time and money required for an evaluation, and to adopt practices to suit the situation. Bamberger et al *Real World Evaluations* provides insights into constrained evaluations².

Monitoring, Evaluation and Management is Inextricably Linked

² Jim Rugh, Michael Bamberger and Linda Marby (2006) *Real World Evaluation: Working Under Budget, Time, Data and Political Constraints*, Sage Publications.

The ongoing monitoring and reporting can provide crucial information for the ex-post evaluation. As noted previously, using consultants at the planning and designing stage can improve the ongoing project management specifically in the data collection. Natural resource management is moving towards a results-based monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework – this needs to be incorporated throughout the project cycle. However, experience has shown that when conducting evaluations, often information is lacking. Include in your budget resources for using the consultant to set up the reporting and monitoring systems to facilitate an adaptive management technique that can also lead to lower costs and greater value from the ex-post evaluation.

Build Your Own Capacities

Project management often can be quite intuitive. It helps to build your own capacities as a project manager in the areas of planning, designing, and setting up project management structures through the likes of a logical framework. If retainers or project management consultation is not within the budget of the organisation – or even if it is! – use training to help develop the key staff in these areas of project management for improving the planning, design, monitoring, reporting, evaluation and improvement. This can often avert issues that may be costly down the track. Moreover, if training is an option, consider tailored trainings to your organisation. Often some of the development costs will be borne by the consultant, yet the end product will be more useful as staff can relate to the examples and systems being discussed.

Ensuring Change: Acceptance of Results

The value of evaluations is largely generated in the use of the results of the evaluation. There are essentially four groups of use for evaluation findings (Kohn et al, 2007)³:

- Instrumental Use – when findings are acted on in specific and direct ways;
- Conceptual use – more indirect, relations to enlightenment or generating knowledge in a given area;
- Symbolic or Legitimative use – drawing on research to justify a position or action that has already been taken for another reason; and
- Process use – focuses on the way individuals learn about the program being evaluation and about the practice of evaluation, through their involvement in the evaluation.

This fits in with the general feedback of meta evaluations, where reports are used for: general information, program modification, reference for other reporting or media requirements, lobbying and advocacy, to make a case for better evaluating other components, to meet project requirements without a plan of change, etc. The question becomes how can the reports and uses by stakeholders be maximised, and what is the role of the consultant in the process.

³ Kohn, F., Pirkis, J., Morley, B., Naccarella, L., Blashki, G., 2007, "Utilisation of findings from the evaluation of a major primary mental health care initiative in Australia", *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, Vol 12, pp 12-24.

Firstly, framing in positives helps the acceptance and adoption of reports, recommendations and learnings. This can assist in getting buy in by the clients in the outputs of the reports. However, this needs to be offset by autonomy, independence and accountability to the code of ethics of the Australian Evaluation Society. Furthermore, having a collaborative approach to evaluations will generate greater buy in of the process and the outcomes, leading to a greater willingness to accept and adopt the outputs of the report.

Something that is easier to know than enact, is to ensure that the report is targeting the appropriate audience. Often the audience may not be the interest party that is conducting the management of the evaluation, but may be other stakeholders not as involved. Therefore, the likelihood is that a short, concise summary style report will be sufficient for these secondary audiences – target them as much as the primary audience to expand the sphere of influence. Presentation is key in this section.

Workshops are also useful tools for building the acceptance and adoption of reports. These can be used to explain the report to key stakeholders that may not have been involved in the evaluation, providing an opportunity for feedback. During the workshop, brainstorming a plan of action for implementing recommendations and the like would also be useful as it provides better opportunities for meta-evaluations and a more structured and acceptable method of implementation.

Summary

An evaluation is a journey, consisting of a partnership between the evaluator / consultant and the client / project manager. There are roles for both agents to maximise the value from a consultation, including expanding the scope of involvement to the planning and designing phases, increasing communication and creating greater buy-in, and presenting the outputs of the report in an acceptable manner. Meta evaluations to improve the understanding of the value of evaluations and is crucial, as is communicating that to the appropriate persons. As experts in the areas of evaluations, it is the responsibility of the consultants to inform of the potential and to build demand for products that the client may not be aware exist or can value add.