Evaluation: what's the use?

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ARTDCONSULTANTS

The promise of evaluation

Evaluation emerged in the 1960s as a professional discipline to guide government decision-making about what directions to take social policies and programs (Patton, 2008). The significant government expenditure on evaluation has been justified by this potential and the potential for evaluation to improve the public good as Sandra Mathison set out in her keynote.

The problem

So what's the problem? Concerns about non-use of evaluations have plagued the profession since its establishment (Patton, 2008; Brandon & Singh, 2009). This means a whole lot of nice looking reports languishing on the shelves gathering dust, rather than being used for good.

The literature on use
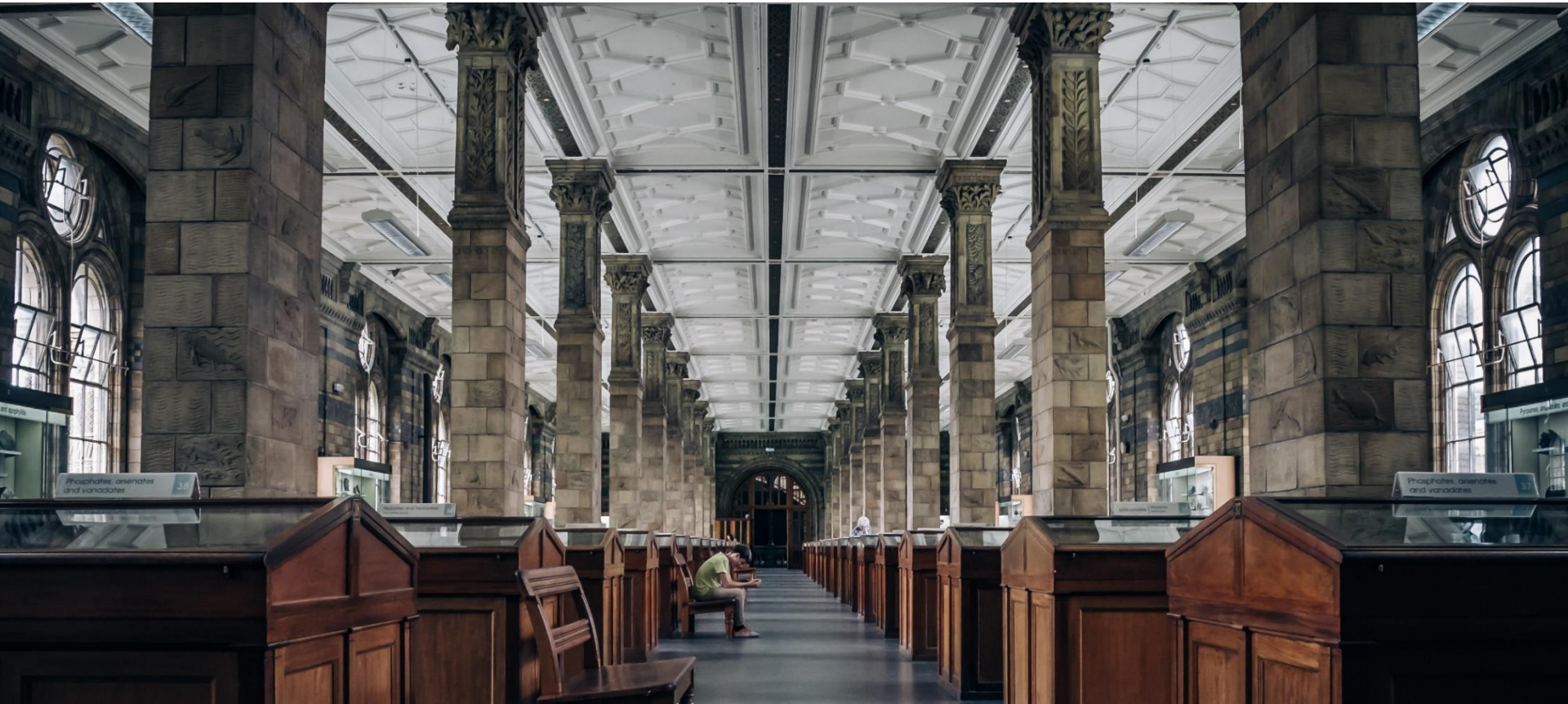
So what do we do in this context? Give up on use and concentrate on the more diffuse concept of influence like some evaluators have advocated? Most evaluators want their work to get used (Henry & Mark, 2003). So there is plethora of literature on the factors associated with evaluation use, theoretical models for how use works and strategies designed to facilitate use.

The factors associated with use

Supply	Demand
• Communication quality (clarity, frequency and reach of reporting) • Timeliness of the evaluation project and reporting • Evaluator competence (leadership style and cultural competence) • Evaluation quality (methods, rigor, type of evaluation model) • The nature of the findings – positive or negative, and anticipated or not • Relevance to the decision-maker • Credibility (objectivity, believability, appropriateness of the evaluation process)	• Personal characteristics of evaluation user • Commitment or receptiveness to evaluation • Political climate (internal and external) • The type of decision to be made and its significance, and novelty of the program • Competing information about the program • Number of audiences and their information needs and perceptions of need for evaluation

• Stakeholder involvement – a category on its own and a mediating factor

Note: list ordered from most to least supporting evidence in the literature

Source: Adapted from Johnson et al., 2009.

Models of use

In the literature from the past two decades, there are at least four major theoretical models of evaluation use, each focused on understanding use from a different perspective: systems (Johnson, 1998); mechanisms (Mark & Henry, 2004); organisational learning (Amo & Cousins, 2007); and argumentation (Valivorta, 2002).

Systems model of use
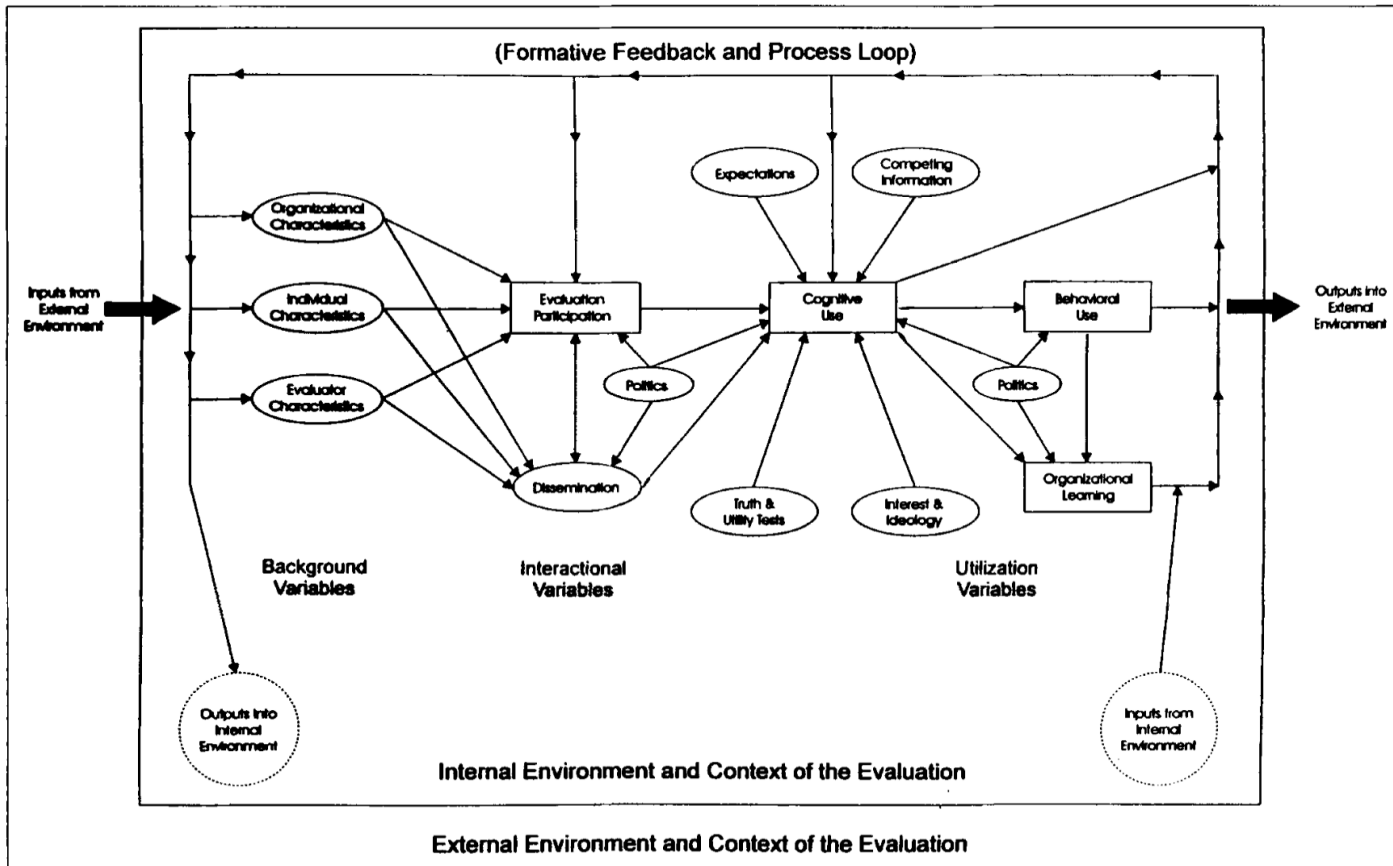
Source: Johnson, 1998, p.104

This model depicts evaluation use as a dynamic process, with feedback loops, and effects created by initial and changing conditions in the external and internal environment. Participation in and dissemination of evaluation play an important role. It's comprehensive but doesn't provide evaluators a clear path.

Mechanisms of influence model
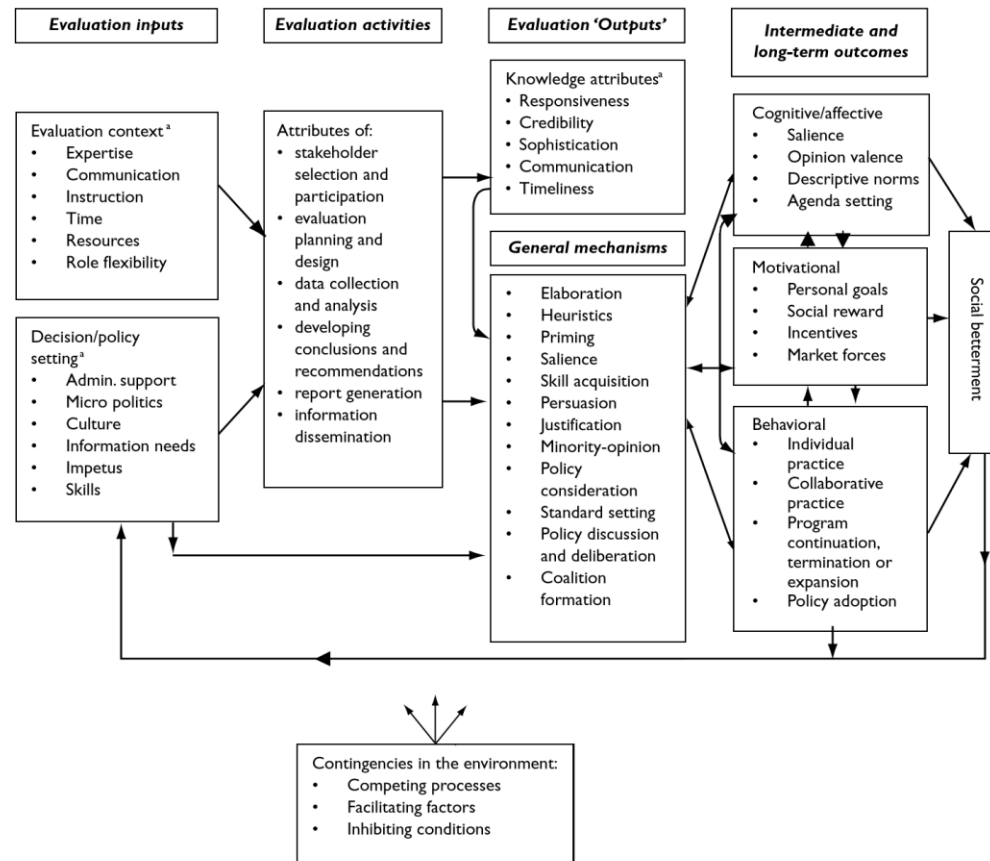
Source: Mark & Henry, 2004, p.46

This model provides identifies mechanisms of evaluation influence drawn from the social sciences, such as priming and salience and recognises outcomes can occur at the individual, interpersonal and collective levels. But it neglects evaluator characteristics and the way influence occurs through the accretion of evidence.
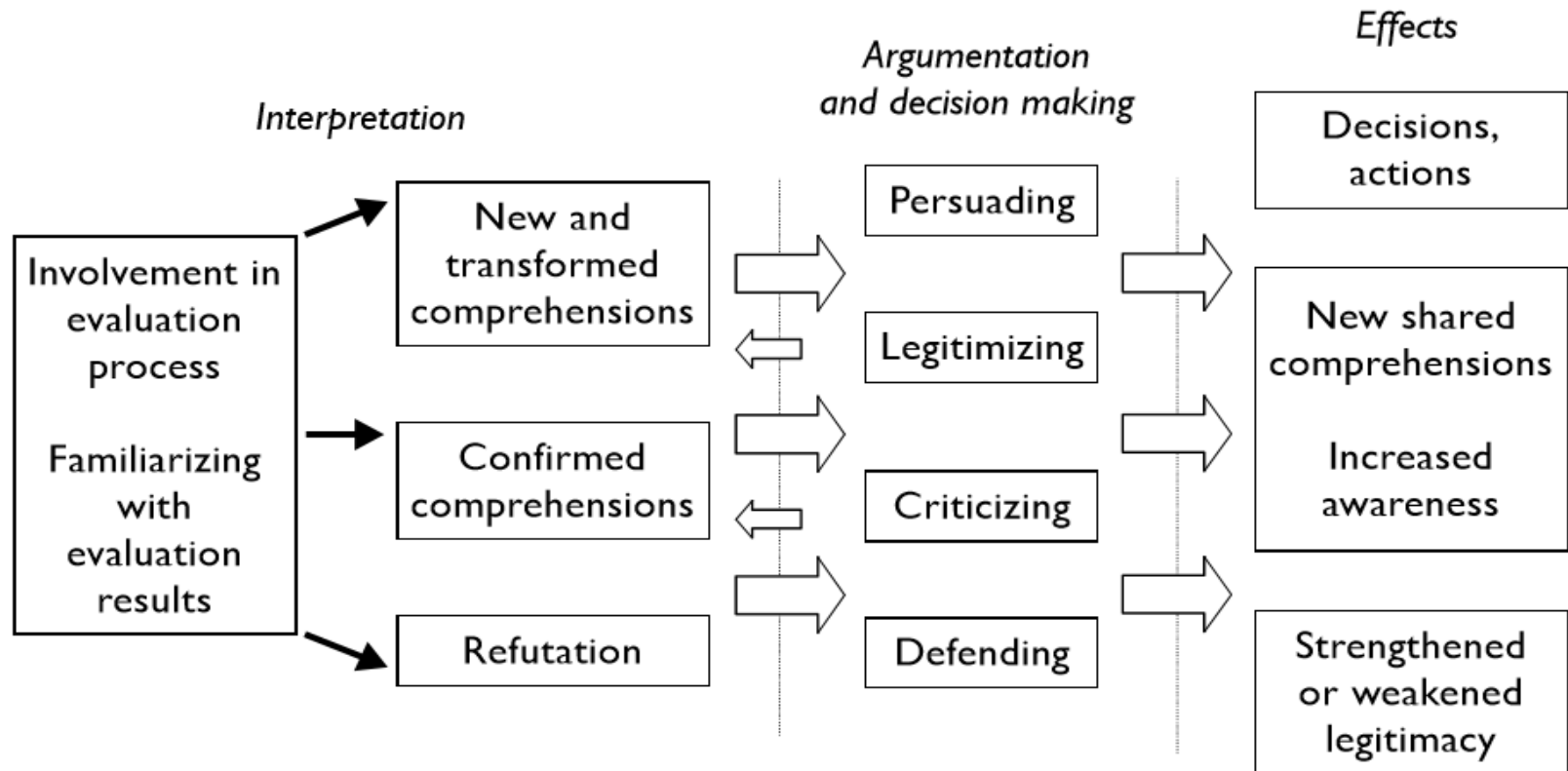
System of organisational learning
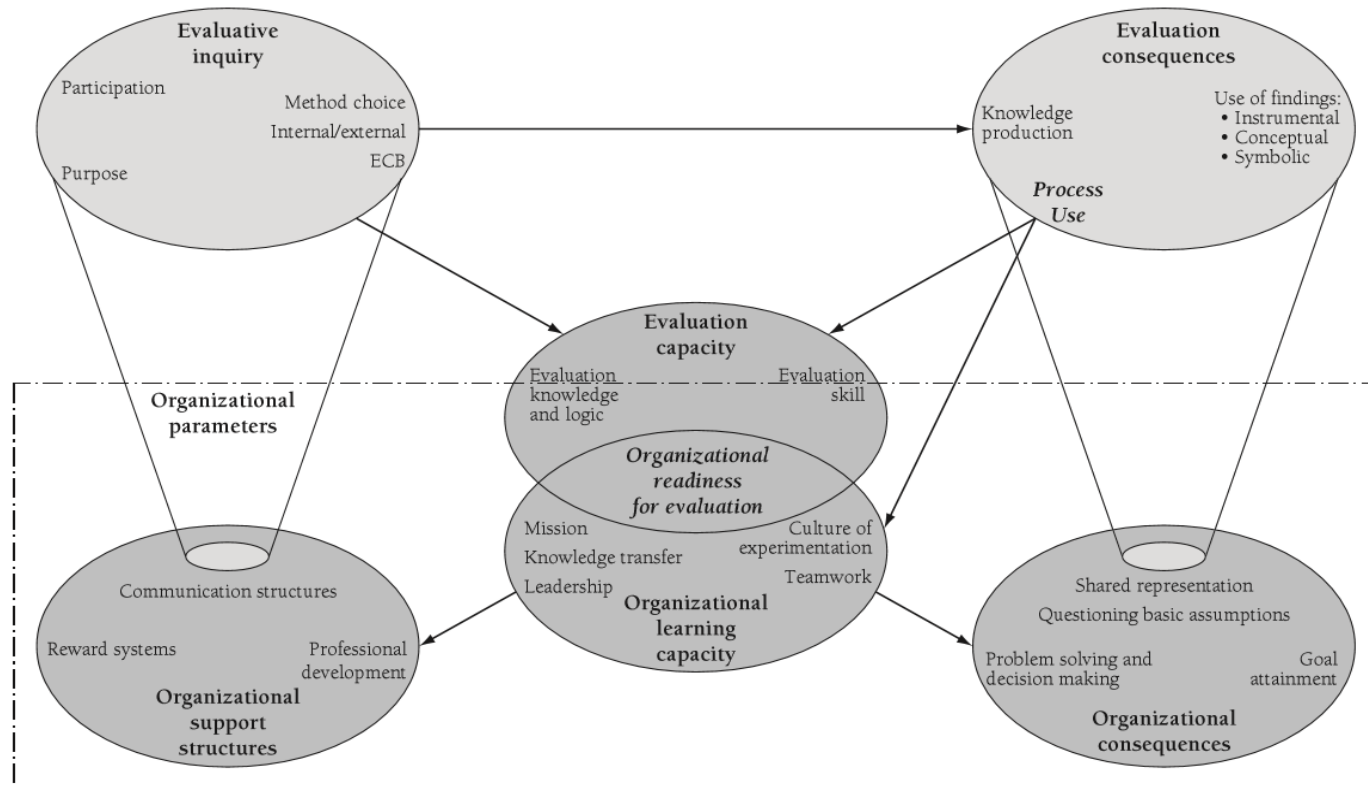
Source: Adapted from Cousins, Goh, Clark, & Lee (2004), in Amo & Cousins, 2007, p.7

This model shows the way influence occurs through the accretion of evidence. But it is hard for practitioners to make the connection between getting their individual evaluations used and organisational learning.

A process of argumentation

Source: Valivorta, 2002, p.64

This model shows evaluations getting used through a process of argumentation – beginning with individuals testing the credibility of evaluation arguments based on fit with their expectations, and testing the utility of arguments based on their ability to act on these. But it doesn't recognise a role for evaluators in this process.

Strategies to facilitate use

Supply	Demand
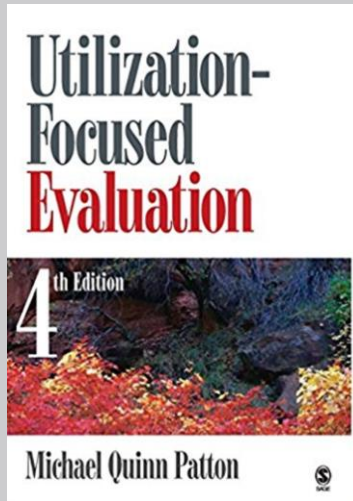
• _Utilisation-focused evaluation checklist_.
• Focus on intended use by intended users
• Iterative process, evaluators adapt their approach as context shifts
• Extent of use in practice is unclear | • Various including
    • Embedding evaluation at the institutional level through legislation and policy
    • Establishing evaluation units to guide evaluation activity
    • Evaluation capacity building strategies
• Mixed evidence
    • policy - some evidence of success at Commonwealth level, with previous policy, but Audit Office of NSW found limited impact
    • Evaluation units – some positive Australian evidence, but also vulnerable |

Gaps in the literature

Pathways to use

There are key gaps in the literature. It doesn't show us which factors are most important to use or satisfactorily deal with the trade offs between factors. And it doesn't show us the pathways to use in context.

Use in the Australian context

And there is minimal literature from Australia so we don't know if the factors shaping use identified in North America and Europe hold here. My study aimed to start to address the gaps by exploring AES members' perspectives.

My study

Stage	Sample	Data collection
Stage 1	All AES members (n=860) Response: n= 93	• Questionnaire based on the literature on factors affecting use and AEA member survey (Preskill & Caracelli, 1996; Johnson et al., 2009) • Questionnaire cognitive and pilot tested, refined • Questionnaire distributed via AES member list • Findings analysed in SPSS
Stage 2	Sample of evaluators (n=22)	• Semi-structured phone interviews • Interview schedule informed by questionnaire analysis focused on practice – success and failures in facilitating use • Analysis concurrent with interviews to enable exploration of emerging themes • Data coded in Nvivo

Synthesis of questionnaire and interview data

Study findings

Non-use is perceived as a problem

AES members rated non-use as a substantial problem, suggesting we've got reports gathering dust on the shelves. But, when they chose an evaluation to report on, they generally chose one that had been used. May be some social desirability responding, but also likely that reports can be used by individuals but not organisations or organisations but not government.

Demand-side: leadership and individual receptiveness to evaluation are key

Factor	n	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Organisation senior leadership demonstrating support for evaluation use	88	10	9.03	1.41	3	10
Individual intended users of the evaluation being receptive to learning from the evaluation	88	9	8.74	1.31	5	10
Incorporating the evaluation into organisational processes and procedures	86	9	8.48	1.43	3	10
Organisation having the resources to implement changes recommended by the evaluation	85	9	8.44	1.76	2	10
Organisation having an evaluation policy that includes commitment to evaluation use	81	8	8.04	1.95	1	10
The evaluation findings being consistent with other information sources (e.g. anecdotal feedback, performance monitoring)	80	7	6.94	1.95	1	10

Supply-side: effective communication and engaging stakeholders in purpose are key

Factor	n	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Communicating the findings in ways that are meaningful to intended users	88	9	8.82	1.33	4	10
Having the interpersonal skills to develop good working relationships with key stakeholders	88	9	8.75	1.2	6	10
Working with primary intended users to define the purpose of the evaluation at the outset	86	9	8.74	1.72	1	10
Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process	88	9	8.48	1.54	2	10
Being culturally competent	85	9	8.35	1.54	3	10
Involving intended users in interpreting the findings	88	9	8.34	1.55	3	10
Aligning the evaluation timeline with organisational decision-making requirements	87	9	8.21	1.82	1	10
Communicating emerging and interim findings to intended users as the evaluation progresses	89	8	8.36	1.43	3	10
Considering factors that could facilitate or prevent evaluation use in evaluation planning	82	8	8.06	1.47	4	10
Involving intended users in defining the recommendations	88	8	7.94	1.64	3	10
Soliciting and using suggestions from stakeholders on the evaluation design	84	8	7.93	1.85	2	10
Adhering to high standards of methodological rigour	86	8	7.76	1.9	2	10
Having substantial knowledge of the policy/ program context	88	8	7.72	1.79	3	10
Maintaining involvement in evaluation follow-up activities	73	6	6.32	2.07	1	10

Overcoming obstacles: resistance, disinterest and fear

Evaluators had success overcoming disinterest and resistance by selling the value of evaluation; engaging stakeholders where they are at and from a 'what's in it for me?' perspective. They helped stakeholders find a purpose when evaluations were being done as a tick-a-box and at risk of non-use. They prepped for acceptance of negative findings through socialisation and the positive sandwich approach.

Hitting brick walls?

Politics
Resourcing
Staff turnover
Timing
Agreed measures?
Cross-agency roles
Dissemination

Alternative routes?

However, some identified alternative routes around seeming brick walls. Some waited out political brick walls, focused on conceptual use, or armed communities with evaluation findings to advocate with governments or negotiate alternative sources of funding. Some focused on dissemination -presenting at conferences, negotiating with clients to share general learnings from evaluations, and identifying learnings for broader policies.

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