Moving beyond: What workforce development evaluations can teach the evaluation workforce

aes25, Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country

18 September 2025

LYDIA PHILLIPS CONSULTING

GrosVenor™ PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

ISCRR Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research

A joint initiative of WorkSafe Victoria and Monash University

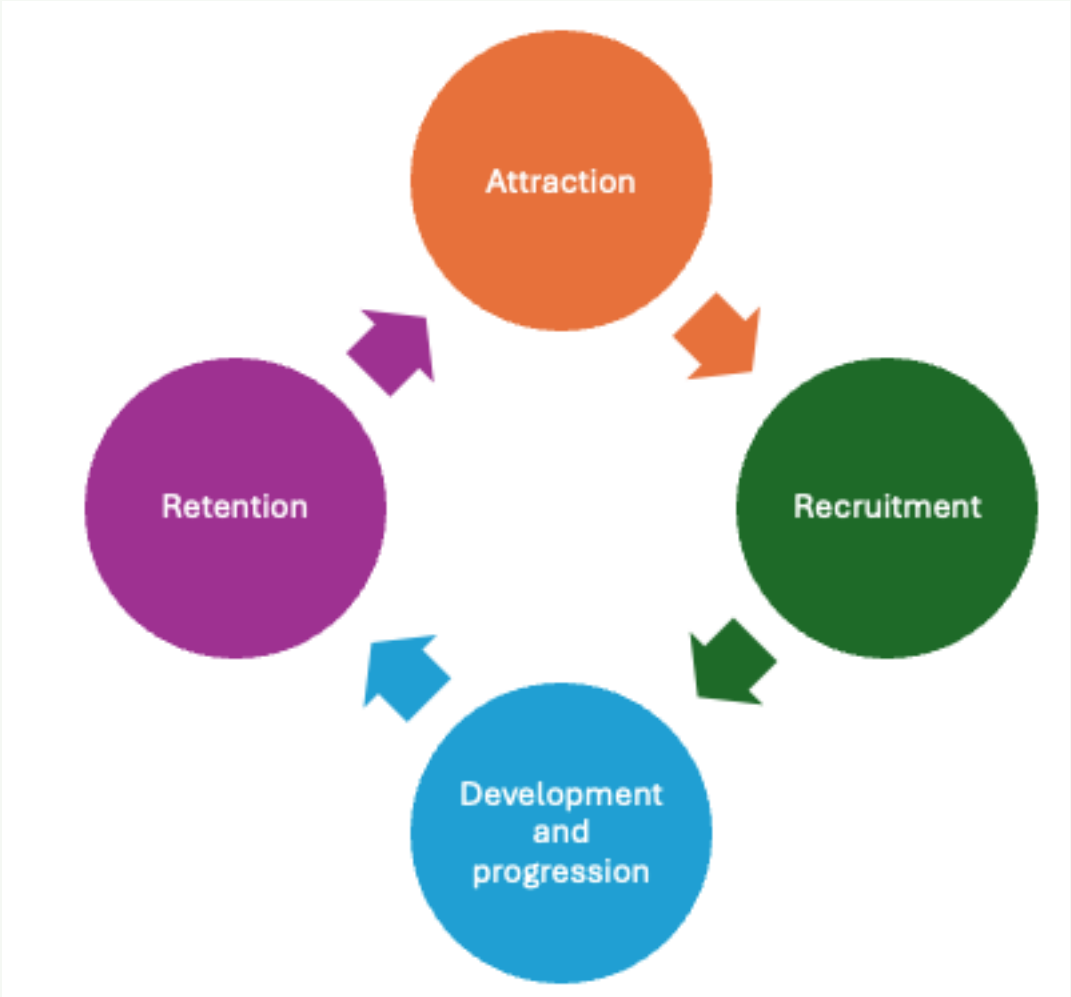
Scene setting

Photo by Mossim Hassab

What do we mean when we talk about ‘workforce’?

GrosVenor™
PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

What do we mean when we talk about ‘workforce development’?



GrosVenor™
PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

What's unique and special about the evaluation workforce?

Could have:

GrosVenor™
PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

What's unique and special about the evaluation workforce?

Well, who is in the evaluation workforce?

Just AES members?

Just people in evaluation-related roles?

Just people who do evaluation-related activities?

What about people who do evaluation-related roles and activities without knowing they're undertaking evaluations?

What about commissioners, program staff who undertake monitoring activities, researchers, policy-makers and other groups?

GrosVenor™
PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

Psychosocial hazards

- A psychosocial hazard is anything that could cause psychological harm

Emotional demand related hazards

		Hazard	Indicators
Trauma related		Vicarious trauma Secondary traumatic stress	Cumulative or immediate distress Symptoms similar to PTSD
Exhaustion related		Compassion fatigue Burnout	Cumulative Exhaustion, detachment, reduced capacity
Values related		Moral injury	Betrayal vs transgressive Guilt, shame, loss of faith/trust

ISCRR Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research
A joint initiative of WorkSafe Victoria and Monash University

Why does conducting safe research matter?

		Context	Implications
Best practice		Growing recognition of the value of lived experience	Moral and ethical responsibility to avoid re-traumatisation/harm
Worker wellbeing		Rate of mental injury in the workplace is rising	Reduces risk of mental injury and increases staff retention
Quality research		Safety is linked to increased innovation and collaboration	Enhances data validity and research outcomes
Legal duty		Psychosocial hazards are now recognised under workplace safety legislation	Employers must identify and manage psychosocial hazards

How did we get here?

Working with more vulnerable populations

Research on psychosocial hazards and mental injury

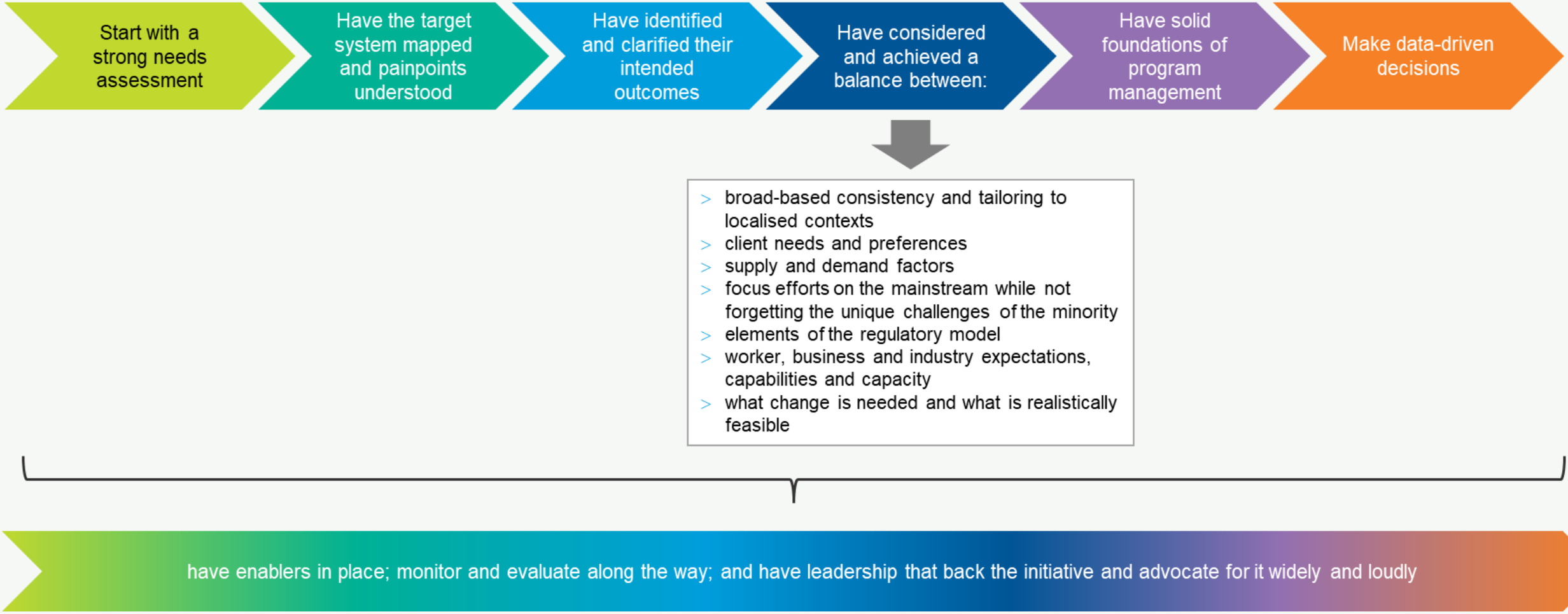
Suicide intervention training

A comprehensive and proactive approach

A proactive approach to psychosocial hazards

Job demands	• All staff workload is actively reviewed and monitored • Research is funded and designed in line with safety standards
Job control	• Exposure to traumatic content is limited to times of the day/week • Staff are given choice on topic, diversity of workload etc.
Support	• An array of support is offered and embedded (informal, formal, peer, supervisor) e.g. staff matching, reflective practice, supervision, project debriefing etc.
Traumatic events or material	• Staff are educated and aware of risks and impacts • Debriefing following exposure and scheduled debriefing

My list of workforce development initiative better practices



GrosVenor™
PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

Relationships

Formal, structured initiatives that bring individuals and organisations together

Individuals:

- Valued relationships and new perspectives
- Diverse growth opportunities
- Often strengthened commitment to their work

Organisations:

- Fostered organisational resilience through collaboration and broader info
- Led to further collaborations between orgs that would traditionally compete
- Supports staff retention

Key ingredients

- Same group of people
- Roles or organisations with complementary missions
- Meet regularly over a reasonable period of time
- Emphasise ‘co-elevation’
- Backbone support and funded

'[M]any actors and multiple mutually-reinforcing activities play a part in the transformation required to stop family violence before it starts, over time…

***[M]eaningful partnerships and coalitions between sectors…are essential, especially when it comes to disrupting the intersecting systems of discrimination and oppression** that drive men's violence against women and family violence experienced by LGBTIQ communities'*

Pride in Prevention Evaluation Guide (2024)

*'We are setting a new standard for working with young people across policy reform, systems change, service design, roll out and evaluation… This strategy calls on decision-makers across government to **recognise the collective efforts needed to actively address the structural power imbalances** that directly affect some young people's lives…*

*Promote **increased youth sector collaboration by supporting communities of practice, sharing tools and resources** **and promoting evidence and evaluation**. '*

Our Promise, Your Future
Vic Youth Strategy 2022-27

“In a world of rising expectations and finite budgets, we can’t afford to rely on guesswork. We need to know – really know – what works. That means making learning part of the system. Not a side project, but a core function.”

- The Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP

When the empirical strikes back

A new ethos of evidence-based decision-making is taking root in the public sector to good effect.

Andrew Leigh

WHEN a German bakery chain wanted to boost sales, it didn't hire consultants or launch a splashy rebrand.

Instead, it did something more radical: it ran a randomised trial. Half its stores offered staff a modest group bonus. The other half didn't.

After a few months, the results were in: a 3 per cent sales increase in the bonus group.

For every dollar spent on bonuses, the company reaped $3.80 in revenue and $2.10 in operational profit.

It's a reminder that in business - and in government - the most powerful tool may not be charisma or instinct, but curiosity.

Randomised trials help us figure out not just what sounds good, but what actually works.

In Australia's public service, that ethos is taking root. We're seeing an emerging culture of testing and learning: through small-scale trials, behavioural nudges, and rigorous evaluation. From tax compliance letters to SMS reminders, the government is using evidence to improve how it delivers. Not by guessing. By learning.

Public sector productivity isn't about profit margins. It's about outcomes that matter: fewer people stuck in long-term unemployment, shorter hospital wait times, better school completion rates. And improving those outcomes begins with one key question: what works?

Randomised trials give us answers. They compare two versions of a program - one with a new tweak, one without - and show whether the tweak made a difference. A redesigned letter. A new prompt. A brief coaching call. Some ideas turn out to be duds. Others change everything.

Take Services Australia. In one trial, the department sent a simple confirmation text message to people who'd submitted a form. Just a short note effectively saying "we've got it".

That tiny tweak cut follow-up calls by 11 percentage points, saving time for both staff and callers.

Another trial found that a well-worded SMS reminder to income support recipients boosted on-time earnings reporting by 13 percentage points and cut payment suspensions nearly in half. The message saved 6000 hours of staff time a year.

The Tax Office tried something similar. Letters to tax agents that gently flagged possible over-claiming of work-related deductions resulted in average claims falling by $191 per taxpayer. Across the sample, that meant more than $2 million in reduced deductions.

These are what behavioural economists call low-friction interventions. They don't require new laws or billion-dollar budgets. They just make systems work better, at minimal cost. And they let us measure the difference between what we intended and what we actually achieved.

Importantly, not every trial works. And that's the point. A few years ago, the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian government developed an app to help university students build resilience.

It was well-designed, backed by solid theory. And had no discernible impact.

But because it was a properly structured trial, we learned something useful: that this approach wasn't effective.

The team didn't stop there. They tested another idea: sending short, supportive text messages to students. That worked. Recipients reported a 7 per cent improvement in life satisfaction. The failure helped shape the success.

Beyond competencies:

Holistic career development

Thank you

LYDIA PHILLIPS CONSULTING

lydia@lphillips.com.au

GrosVenor™ PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

kristyhornby@grosvenor.com.au

ISCRR Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research

A joint initiative of WorkSafe Victoria and Monash University

sarah.oxford@monash.edu