

## Evaluating the Role of Formal Training in Developing an Evaluation Capability in a Large Organisation

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### **1. Background**

The Victorian Department of Primary Industry's Evaluation Support Team (EST) is responsible for developing the capability of project teams to manage internal and external evaluations (McDonald 2003). A number of strategies have been implemented to reach this goal including a secondment program, participation in and ongoing support to key project teams, one-on-one support, hosting international experts, securing and maintaining support from senior management, and a formal training program.

The focus of this paper, the formal training program, was developed in 1999 to address a growing level of interest in project evaluation from department staff. To date 13 courses have been run for staff, plus two for senior staff and two for Catchment Management Authorities.

The course is run in three sessions over a total of six days. This represents a significant investment in time and resources for the Department. Is this investment paying off?

The Evaluation Support Team has developed a program logic to clarify the theory behind the approach taken. The training program is an integral part of the logic.

In order to test the espoused logic, detailed evaluation has been conducted, using training participants and staff at different levels of the organisation as key informants. Some results from this evaluation are presented below.

### **2. Espoused Logic**

As part of the EST's ongoing evaluation planning processes, a detailed program logic has been developed to clarify the work of the team. The resultant logic is a multi-legged, two-phase logic, based on Bennett's hierarchy (Bennett 2003). The phase relevant to the training course is detailed in Figure 1.

Building upon this logic, the EST has also developed an evaluation plan that includes six key evaluation questions. These key evaluation questions are formulated to focus the evaluation on those areas of most interest and relevance to the evaluation audiences of the EST. The plan contains two evaluation questions specifically relevant to the training course, these being:

- What difference did evaluation training make in what situations and why?
- What are participant reactions to the training?

**Figure 1: Extract from espoused logic (Dart et al 2001)**

Results	Project teams are able to demonstrate impact & sound management to a sufficient degree. Projects are improved through the evaluation and planning process.
Practice change	70% of project teams have a program logic model and some key evaluation question. Evidence of a culture of evaluation, where people regularly use evaluation frameworks as a part of their work.
KASA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitude that evaluation is an important part of everyday work that needs resourcing.</li> <li>• Skills to develop good key evaluation questions and to choose appropriate methods and develop useful program logic</li> <li>• Aspirations: that people find evaluation a credible and exciting process, that some want to learn more.</li> </ul>
Reactions	That the workshops and consultations are of high quality and of direct use to them
Participants	Intermediate users: Project teams and project managers
Activities	Evaluation training workshops Post training follow-up One-on-one consultation with key people in projects

### 3. Reactions

Since course number two the EST has systematically collected qualitative and quantitative data regarding participants' reactions to the evaluation training course. This data collection has been integrated into the main body of the training course as a means of demonstrating to participants a range of different data collection techniques. In addition to affecting learning outcomes, this form of demonstration has also resulted in the generation of a large pool of data for the assessment of participant reactions to the course.

At every course data is collected from participants using sociometry, "dartboards", and a daily debrief by the training team. This data has been used to improve the timing, notes and overall content of the course, through a continuous improvement approach.

Quantitative information gathered through questionnaires completed by course participants has also been used to track whether this continuous improvement approach is actually working. This quantitative course score is an average of a score for the quality of the sessions (out of ten) and a score for the usefulness of the training course for the participants' own project work (out of ten). Together, these two scores form a valid construct which we have named "value", and which relates to the anticipated reactions detailed in the program logic for the training course (see Figure 1).

Over the last 12 courses the average score for "value" has increased from 7.6 to 8. The trend line has a slope of 0.06 and a  $r^2$  of 0.49. Based upon this, the EST is confident that this increase is significant in a quantitative sense.

The increase in "value" score has also been confirmed by other data collected through the EST evaluation. Additional qualitative data for example, was collected using a

phone survey of 63 participants from the first four courses, 12 months after the end of course 4. The majority of comments were very positive, with a number of respondents concurring that the EST evaluation training course was “the best course I have ever done”. Despite this however, it is important to note that not all survey responses were positive and that some informants raised some concerns. Fortunately, most of these concerns had been already addressed through the continuous improvement approach implemented within the training course itself. Some examples of these concerns and the strategies used to address them are outlined in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Addressing participants concerns (Dart 2002)**

Major concerns expressed by participants from first four training courses	Action taken
Framework too complex, could have been simpler and more prescriptive	Framework substantially revised, and more prescriptive elements added.
Program logic impenetrable	Original choices of logic models abandoned in 1999 in preference for the simpler model “Bennett’s Hierarchy”
Sessions needed to be more relevant to completing a plan, less theoretical	Sessions completely revised, each session now corresponds to a section in the evaluation plan.
Training dry and heavy	Training has been streamlined, and each session is accompanied with an experiential activity. There is less theoretical input also.

Through the analysis of this pool of data the EST is satisfied that the team has created an evaluation training course that is producing the desired reactions articulated in the EST’s espoused program logic.

#### 4. Practice Change

The phone survey of participants from courses 1 – 4 (mentioned above) also yielded valuable quantitative data regarding changes in participant attitudes and practices after completing the course.

Significant findings from this survey included the following:

- 61 percent of participants had used the evaluation framework from the training to prepare evaluation plans for new projects. This finding represents significant progress towards the practice change objective articulated in the EST’s espoused program logic.
- Since participating in the evaluation training course, 75 percent of participants had applied program logic in their own work. This result supported findings from a wider evaluation of the EST’s work that found there had been a significant increase in the quality of project design within the Department as a result of project teams using program logic.
- 78 percent of participants indicated that the training course had changed their attitude to evaluation.

In addition to this analysis, two multiple regression models were developed that demonstrated a link between participants’ performance during and after the training (for example, whether they used or modified approaches to data collection) and:

- a) The likelihood of participants going on to complete an evaluation plan for a new project, and
- b) whether or not participants had moved on to hold a major evaluation management role in their work teams.

Of particular interest was the lack of correlation between the first dependant variable (ie: participants who went on to prepared an evaluation for a new project) and the second dependant variable (participants going on to hold a key evaluation role in a project team). Another interesting finding was that experience in evaluation before completing the course was not a predictor of whether participants would end up with a key evaluation role in their work teams.

#### **4. Comment**

As the findings presented here indicate, the Evaluation Support Team's evaluation training course has had a positive impact on participants' attitudes to evaluation. There is also evidence to suggest that the skills imparted at the training course are being applied by participants in their day to day project management. The wider evaluation of the Evaluation Support Team has also indicated that overall, there has been a significant improvement in evaluation efforts across the Department, and that the training course has contributed to this result. So, to answer the question posed at the opening of this paper, yes the investment in the formal training course has paid off.

In conclusion, it is important to note that any observed improvements in the evaluation capability of the Department of Primary Industries would not have occurred without the influence of other factors. These include factors such as support from senior management, the availability of ongoing support from the EST to participants, and the clarity of the frameworks used both in the training and in project management.

#### **References**

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