

“A steep learning curve” The creation of Centrelink’s Learning Evaluation Network

Sandra Stopher

Sandra Stopher
Sandra.SM.Stopher@centrelink.gov.au
Learning Evaluation Co-ordinator, Centrelink Virtual College

*Paper presented at the Australasian Evaluation Society 2004 International Conference, 13-15
October-Adelaide, South Australia www.aes.asn.au*

Abstract

Traditionally, Centrelink has not conducted evaluations of learning programs past the reaction (or ‘happy sheet’) level. The Centrelink Virtual College (CVC), Centrelink’s Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and the focal point for learning within Centrelink nationally, recognised the need for a more systematic and consistent learning evaluation approach focussing on continuous improvement. To encourage this, the CVC sought to actively develop and promote an evaluation culture within Centrelink’s L&D network through the introduction of a national strategy for the evaluation of learning and a suite of evaluation instruments specifically designed to complement this strategy.

To support L&D staff in the implementation of these changes, the “Learning Evaluation Network” (or ‘LEN’) was created. This paper looks at some of the challenges encountered in the creation of this Network and some of the strategies used to overcome these difficulties. It also highlights ongoing problems in the development of the LEN as a community of practice; in particular, it looks at how the differing experiences and needs of the primary stakeholders (the Virtual College and the different Areas’ Learning and Development staff nationally) have impacted on the functioning of the LEN.

What are “Centrelink” and the “Centrelink Virtual College”?

Centrelink is the Australian Government’s Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency, administering legislation and policy on behalf of a number of Federal Government Departments. The organisation is divided into sixteen operational areas nationally with each area responsible for managing its own learning delivery according to the individual needs of their staff.

In April 2001, Centrelink created the “Centrelink Virtual College” (CVC) to act as both Centrelink’s internal Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and as a focal point for learning within Centrelink nationally. The Virtual College has established and promoted ANTA training packages throughout the organisation and seeks to promote best practice in all aspects of learning.

Evaluation within Centrelink

While Centrelink has always been committed to the evaluation of the implementation of its policy and legislative programs, traditionally Centrelink as an organisation has not conducted evaluations of its learning programs past the “reaction” (or ‘happy sheet’) level (Kirkpatrick 1994). Looking to improve the way in which learning is evaluated within Centrelink, the CVC commissioned an external evaluation consultant to undertake a study of how evaluation of learning is being conducted in Centrelink in 2002 and it was discovered that the majority of learning programs looked at as part of the study did not include an evaluation past the reaction (or ‘happy sheet’) level.

As a result of this report (Mitchell, 2002), the CVC acknowledged the need for a more systematic and standardised learning evaluation approach focussing on continuous improvement. A key feature of this was the recognition that an holistic and consistent national learning evaluation strategy was needed to enable the improvement of evaluation of learning practices nationally across all Centrelink areas. In order to achieve this, a national strategy for the evaluation of learning and a suite of evaluation instruments specifically designed to complement this strategy were developed by Centrelink’s external evaluation consultant.

The establishment of the “Learning Evaluation Network” (LEN)

After initial testing of the instruments, it was decided that these documents were ready to be implemented nationally however some Learning and Development staff indicated that they felt apprehensive about the implementation of such a change to their current evaluative practice. This, combined with the existing level of evaluation knowledge identified in the initial report, led to the realisation that the L&D network may benefit from the creation of a community of practice to share information and support the implementation of the new evaluative strategies. This idea was suggested to the L&D network and was well received. As such, to facilitate the development and promotion of an evaluation culture and to assist L&D staff in the implementation of the national strategy and suite of tools, the “Learning Evaluation Network” (or ‘LEN’) was formed at the beginning of 2004.

Challenges to overcome

As an organisation with sixteen distinct Areas covering most of the country, the sheer distance of geography was one of the most difficult challenges to overcome in the establishment of the LEN. The Areas that Centrelink is divided into vary greatly in size; the smallest (the Area covering the Northern Territory) has just under five hundred staff), while the Area which governs Centrelink’s call centres has almost five thousand staff. These Areas are also spread over the entire country, which made it a difficult (and expensive) prospect to try to get the participants together physically.

Due to the extensive information sharing tools already used within Centrelink, participants agreed that the best way to run the LEN (at least initially) was to use the existing electronic resources available. After surveying the Learning & Development managers in each Area, it was decided that, partially as a cost-saving measure and partially because it was an “easy” way to introduce the LEN, an electronic bulletin board (called a “TeamRoom”) would be set up as the primary focal point of the LEN. Participants would be encouraged to post experiences and comments under particular topics and other participants would have the opportunity to respond and discuss.

While the TeamRoom worked in theory, it soon became apparent that another problem was the vast difference in the levels of knowledge of participants. A number of participants in the LEN were experienced learning evaluators, either having conducted numerous detailed learning evaluations or having completed significant levels of study on the subject (in some cases, both). Other participants found that they did not have the same level of knowledge as these, more experienced participants. Unfortunately, this led to some LEN members submitting extensive examples of their experiences while others felt less confident about participating in the discussion. This was also due, in part, to the initial inexperience of the LEN facilitator in facilitating communities of practice.

Another problem encountered was the timing of the creation of the LEN; when the LEN was initially set up, the evaluation tools it was designed to support were not released nationally. The “suite of tools”, in particular, was still being tested by the time the LEN ‘went live’.

A learning programme developed by the external evaluation consultant to train LEN participants in the national learning evaluation strategy and the customisable suite of evaluation tools was delivered as a way of helping to bring all participants to a base level of knowledge upon which to build.

The LEN facilitator also undertook a commitment to learn more about communities of practice and how they should function. This increased knowledge will assist the facilitator to better encourage participation from all LEN members in the future and develop an active and valuable network of support for learning evaluation within Centrelink.

Lessons learned

A community of practice is not just something which will happen on its own, it needs to be supported and encouraged and there are a specific set of skills which enable someone to do this. While this may appear to be an obvious statement, at the time I was setting up the LEN, I was not familiar with this as a process separate to facilitating learning. In hindsight, I would have waited until the tools were fully tested before trying to establish the LEN. Although it was initially set up prior to the release of the tools as a way of trying to prepare participants, looking back, this only served to highlight the vast differences in the knowledge levels within the L&D network. I would also have read extensively on communities of practice and their facilitation prior to creating the LEN to ensure I had the skills to facilitate and manage the TeamRoom more effectively.

Some challenges will never be totally overcome; there will always be different knowledge levels within the LEN participants and the sharing of information and experiences needs to be supported and encouraged. There will also continue to be geographical distance between participants, however this can be managed by using Centrelink’s electronic resources to facilitate and further strengthen the network. Finally, the problem of inexperience, both in the facilitator and the participants, will improve over time. While it cannot be expected that these problems will disappear, they can be managed and negotiated while still allowing the group to develop and

mature into a supportive, knowledge-sharing base to aid the implementation of the CVC's national learning evaluation strategies.

What next?

Although it is still very much in its infancy, Centrelink's Learning Evaluation Network must continue to be seen as a fluid entity, evolving to meet the needs of its participants. As participants, and the LEN facilitator, become more experienced in the functioning of the group, it should provide an invaluable forum for the promotion and development of quality learning evaluation practices in Centrelink. It is a growing process and will develop, in time, into an important tool for the sharing of ideas and experiences.

It is also important to include the needs of the participants in the future development of the network. Once the LEN was created and its existence accepted by participants, the facilitator asked LEN members for ideas on directions in which they'd like to see the network develop in the future.

Some suggestions from participants, which will be looked at over the next twelve months, include:-

- more regular 'phone hookups (teleconferences);
- discussions on particular topics, possibly with "guest speakers";
- smaller work groups within the larger group devoted to particular areas of interest (and aimed at particular knowledge levels); and
- virtual workshops in which participants work through various scenarios together and critique strategies and experiences.

The Learning Evaluation Network is still developing and trying to find its identity within the Centrelink Learning & Development community. As the confidence levels of participants increase, and as their familiarity with the national learning evaluation strategy and the suite of tools grows, it will become a more active forum for the discussion of ideas and the sharing of knowledge and experiences. In the future, it is envisaged that the LEN will become an invaluable tool in the development of sound learning evaluation practices, with continued support and input from the L&D network and the Centrelink Virtual College, assisting the CVC to continue to encourage and recognise quality learning practices nationally.

References

Kirkpatrick, Donald L. (1994) *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels* [Berrett-Koehler; San Francisco, USA]

Mitchell, John (2002) *Evaluation Strategy and Models for Centrelink's Learning Programs* [internal working paper]

Mitchell, John (2003) *Centrelink Evaluation Strategy for Learning* [internal working paper]

Mitchell, John (2003) *Customisable Suite of Evaluation Tools* [internal working paper]

Wadsworth, Yoland (1997) *Everyday Evaluation on the Run* [Allen & Unwin; St Leonards, Australia]