

Enhancing the Evaluation Ethos in the Victorian Government Sector

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Abstract

In a government organisation, good governance is about making good decisions that result in desired public outcomes. A government that has an ethos of evaluation is better placed to demonstrate public value for taxpayers as well as stakeholders and clients. The desire to increase the evaluation culture, share organisational learnings, and further build capability in Victorian Government organisations led to the creation of the Victorian Public Sector (VPS) Evaluation Community of Interest (ECoI).

The valuable contribution of the ECoI is recognised for both its support for individual evaluators, and the wider promotion of evaluation within the Victorian Public Sector. This paper outlines the history of the VPS Evaluation Community of Interest, the format of the community, and some suggestions for other Departments interested in establishing a Community of Interest.

Background

In the late 1990's the demand for public sector performance and accountability resulted in the development of the Evaluation Support Unit within the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI) (McDonald et al., 2003). While much effort was given to developing the evaluation capacity of staff in order to promote and instil a culture of evaluation, the Evaluation Unit also identified the importance of the evaluators themselves undertaking evaluation capacity building activities in order to improve their skills and demonstrate their commitment to the evaluation discipline. Evaluation staff in DPI had been informally networking with evaluators in other Victorian departments, and realised that a more formalised opportunity for networking could be beneficial for all VPS evaluators. The Unit believed that by sharing and fostering knowledge between Victorian Government departments on evaluation and evaluation capacity building that they would gain a better understanding on what works well in other Victorian departments. The other opportunity identified was to develop networks with VPS evaluators where the unique experiences relating to public-sector evaluation and evaluation capacity building could be shared.

The Evaluation Support Unit invited VPS staff with an interest in evaluation to attend quarterly events in which they could develop their understanding and skills in the evaluation field. The ECoI events

provide the opportunity for peer support to VPS staff involved in the discipline and theory of evaluation; the building of skills and understanding of evaluation; the discussion, consideration and exploration of new knowledge and approaches in a supportive, inclusive environment and; a setting where evaluation experts could be invited to present on topics of interest in the VPS.

Until late 2006, the one-day event was held at a DPI location on the outskirts of Melbourne as the ECoI was scheduled to coincide with the quarterly DPI Evaluators meeting. The DPI location was easily accessible for DPI evaluation staff that travelled from around Victoria to attend the 2-days, and was usually attended by 20-30 participants, of which about two-thirds were DPI employees. As the popularity of the ECoI grew within the other departments it was decided to schedule the meetings in the Melbourne Central Business District to encourage participation. This resulted in a doubling of participants, with more departments becoming involved and willing to host events.

Over time, membership has grown to include nearly 200 members representing 15 public-sector organisations (including all the major Victorian departments). The ECoI promotes a high level of openness where challenges unique to the public sector can be discussed without fear or conflict or confidentiality issues (eg. discussing Government business with private consultants in the room), where insights and evaluation processes from other Government organisations can be shared, the promotion of collaboration between agencies is encouraged, and where the ‘lone voices’ of evaluators in organisations that don’t have an established or supportive evaluation culture can be nurtured and encouraged.

How is the ECoI different to other evaluation forums?

The ECoI is based on the theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) – which are defined as a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, online).

Members of the ECoI chose to be called a Community of Interest rather than a Community of Practice so as to be inclusive of VPS staff working towards practice in evaluation or simply interested in evaluation, as well as those actively applying evaluation in their work. The focus on ‘interest’ rather than ‘practice’ has had positive benefits in that senior management has felt the ECoI is inclusive enough for them to attend as ‘non-practitioners’, with one manager reporting:

“I became involved as a funder of community programs that would like to support them [community project teams] in their planning and evaluation processes.”

The ECoI members have chosen to limit involvement to VPS staff only for a number of reasons:

1. So that the ECoI is differentiated from the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) regional activities (enhance rather than compete).

2. It provide an opportunity to share ideas from within the various departments and organisations to learn how others manage government challenges, and to promote collaboration between agencies.
3. Sessions achieve a high level of openness and knowledge transfer, and promote frank and open discussions without fear of conflict or confidentiality issues (ie. from potential tenderers).
4. It is a key networking event for staff who may not be able to participate in other evaluation forums.

Format of the Evaluation Community of Interest

ECoI meetings are held quarterly in Melbourne. The hosting and chairing of meetings is rotated amongst the departments involved, whilst the coordination and day-to-day administration is overseen by DPI. Usually, the hosting department provides an overview of evaluation within their organisation and invites speakers to present on particular topics or evaluation techniques. Staff from other organisations also have an opportunity to present or raise questions of concern or interest for discussion. Generally, a mix of presentations and hands-on activities is encouraged.

Nickols (2003) suggests that a 'sponsor' is important for a CoP as they can "help remove barriers that obstruct community progress". To date, the ECoI has been self-governing however it is seeking to formalise sponsorship by DPI's Deputy Secretary who has informally advocated for the group since its establishment. The support from the executive management has been greatly beneficial by actively supporting evaluation in the Government sector, as well as to encourage individual evaluators to participate and build their evaluation capacity. Some members are seeking similar support from their department's executive management in order to 'legitimise' and encourage their staffs' participation.

The ECoI is also an opportunity to invite national and international evaluation experts to present on issues of particular interest. Speakers include Patricia Rogers (CIRCLE-RMIT, Australia) discussing 'Managing for Outcomes', and recently Ellen Taylor-Powell (University of Wisconsin) presented on developing Theories of Action. The expert speakers are a great 'drawcard' which incites a lot of interest and lively discussion.

The ECoI meetings are supported by Project Forum - an open source web-based workspace that provides a central point for information capture and exchange. The initial intention was to provide a medium to ensure that knowledge and presentations developed over the history of the ECoI were captured, and could be searched and added to by members. The forum is also a medium to add evaluation resources, conference or seminar information, provide links to appropriate internet sites, to participate in discussion forums on topics, issues or challenges, or to seek assistance on particular matters.

There is usually a dedicated session at the end of each event to reflect on the event, the topics and the presentations. This serves to reaffirm and share new knowledge and insights, provides feedback on the event, and is a positive way to conclude the event. It is also an opportunity to trial techniques, and explain and explore how those techniques (eg. photolanguage, appreciative inquiry) could be useful for reflection sessions at other meeting or evaluation events.

While hosting of meetings (setting the agenda, organising speakers etc.) is shared around the participating organisations, central control of coordination by DPI has been critical to provide a central contact point for the ECoI and to ensure the day-to-day management is maintained. This includes regular updating of the membership list to include new members and contact detail updates, coordination of meeting logistics (eg. venue, catering, attendance at events), and moderation of the Project Forum.

What do our member say?

A recent evaluation (yes- we do practice what we preach!) was undertaken to help with the planning of this year's events. Questions were asked about preferred times, topics and presenters for the events, as well as to gain an understanding of the drivers and barriers to participation and opportunities for improvement. Results suggested that VPS staff prefer quarterly, mid-week events lasting half a day, with a focussed event topic and fewer speakers to allow more time for audience interaction. This was recently trialled at the last ECoI and was received positively by participants. It is anticipated that this will be the preferred format in the future.

The key reasons expressed by members for participation in the ECoI were to exchange ideas and experience both formally and informally; networking, developing contacts and peer support; skill and knowledge development in evaluation theories and methods; to understand the unique challenges of evaluation in Government; and to build a culture within Departments and across the Victorian Public Sector. The ECoI was seen as particularly valuable forum for staff new to evaluation to meet other practitioners and learn more about evaluation theories and examples of practice:

“Just wanted to say thanks very much for an enjoyable and informative evaluation community of interest session last week. I am a new member and have found it to be a great resource already!”

“For me, the ECoI has a training aspect as I am new to evaluation and still learning. I really like hearing people from other departments present - what they are doing that is great (e.g. the presentation by DPCD last time about their website) or lessons learnt & sharing that experience.”

ECoI members suggested that senior decision makers could be invited to the events in order to promote ownership of the community by each department, as well as highlighting the importance of an

evaluative culture in Victorian Public Sector. Some staff were keen for their department to recognise participation in the ECoI as a core activity, rather than an 'extra', by including commitment of attendance in their yearly work plans. Members are also keen to share evaluation tools, guidelines or templates developed within departments in order to build on or use existing resources rather than 'reinventing the wheel', and promote a whole-of-government approach to evaluation.

What would we suggest for other Government Departments interested in establishing a cross-departmental Community of Interest/Practice?

- Have a clear purpose.

What is it you want the CoI/CoP to achieve? Why does it exist? How is it different from other existing events? How inclusive/exclusive is the community (practitioners only?)
- Secure a Sponsor.

A sponsor is someone within the department/Organisation who advocates for the group, and encourages staff to participate. Usually a 'high level' manager. Particularly important for newly-establishing communities.
- Central coordination.

While rotating the 'hosting' of the event promotes a sense of ownership, it is important to have a central 'locus of control' for the everyday administration tasks, as well as providing a central contact point for new and existing members.
- Mix of topics and presentation methods.

Over time we have found that participants prefer a 'themed' event (eg. capacity building, Program Logic) with a mixture of presentations and activities. The adoption of adult learning principles and trialling of new methods/techniques is encouraged.
- Allow time for reflection.

Dedicate time at the end of an event for reflection on the event, topics and presentations. This is important to reaffirm new knowledge and insights, share experiences, provide feedback on the event and is a good way to conclude an event.
- Evaluate!

Regular evaluation ensures the CoI is meeting the needs of the participants and can assist in planning for both logistics (preferred timing, frequency, venue) and topics/themes of interest.

References

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