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Gathering evidence - using data. The implications and advantages for undertaking evaluation research in-house.

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INTRODUCTION

Evaluation and/or social research is integral to project planning, engagement with stakeholders and continuous improvement. However when such a body of work is required, project managers and teams often grapple with the decision as to whether to undertake the evaluation in-house, or whether to commission it to an external consultant.

This paper seeks to present the views and opinions of a small group of evaluation and social research practitioners, project team members and managers operating within the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI), with regard to their experiences in undertaking, managing and/or using research which was undertaken in-house or externally.

The information for this paper was gathered with the intention of documenting the thoughts and experiences of a discrete number of staff within the DPI to assist internal decision-making when future evaluation or social research is required. The data presented reflects staff personal opinions with regard to undertaking, managing and/or using evaluation or social research and should only be referenced for the opinions upon which it is based, rather than as a broad scale investigation into what works and what doesn't.

GATHERING THE DATA

Data was gathered from 10 staff members employed under various portfolios within the Victorian DPI between July 9 and July 17, 2009. Each staff member that was contacted had some experience with directly undertaking a piece of evaluation or social research, had managed a contract with an external consultant or was required to use the findings and recommendations of research undertaken on the project's behalf. These staff were involved in projects that focussed on agricultural production, DPI engagement with stakeholders, emergency response and invasive plant and animal management.

Staff members were contacted via email, requesting their time to submit their thoughts and experiences with regard to the subject of interest. The email contained an attachment with eight

questions. Some staff opted to submit their responses via email, while others preferred to answer the questions via phone interview.

CONSIDERATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND ADVANTAGES FOR UNDERTAKING EVALUATION AND SOCIAL RESEARCH IN-HOUSE OR EXTERNALLY

When is an evaluation internal or external?

There appears to be considerable literature about the question of what is an ‘external’ versus ‘internal’ evaluation. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ evaluator aligns with that of Kendall-Tackett (2005, cited in Yang, 2006, p 378) where an external evaluator is ‘any individual not directly employed by the program under evaluation’ and an internal evaluator is ‘any staff directly involved in the program under evaluation, or in the agency in which the program is housed’. However, the lines can be easily blurred, as noted by one DPI staff member who raises the point that often evaluators within DPI are seen as ‘external’ because they have limited knowledge or involvement with the project team they are evaluating.

“Even though we are seen as internal evaluators we are external to the projects that we work on, which gives us the benefit of being ‘external’ but with the knowledge of the internal structures.”

External consultants can also become ‘internalised’, particularly when they become familiar with an organisation or program to the point where they ‘no longer need the introduction or orientation that a new external evaluator would need (Yang & Shen, 2006, p379). These are worthwhile considerations and are explored to various extents throughout this paper.

Knowledge and accessibility to project teams and/ or stakeholders

When undertaking an evaluation of a discrete internal project, accessibility to team members and project data is integral to building the evaluation and undertaking the analysis. DPI staff who had undertaken research in-house mentioned the advantage of inherently knowing the staff they needed to speak with, managers they needed to seek approval from and data systems to access. One participant commented:

“There were efficiencies with implementing the evaluation internally because I knew the organisation and the people I needed to speak to.”

Staff feel that access to project teams was important in terms of time efficiencies, however, passing on comprehensive information regarding key contacts and relevant systems and processes is part of

good project management and should not be a limiting factor for external consultants when undertaking a piece of work on an organisation's behalf.

Involving the project team in the evaluation as the research progressed was also cited as an advantage when undertaking an evaluation in-house. In one case, a DPI officer described how an evaluation operated as part of an overall review of an emergency response effort led by DPI. The officer who undertook this evaluation felt that the ability to work within the project team was advantageous in terms of accessing personnel within the team, the ability to see the team in their 'real environment' and the opportunity to implement continuous improvement as the evaluation progressed. They recount:

"This was about real continuous improvement. The evaluation worked within the review – as one part of it - so information was used to guide improvements throughout the process, as well as after it."

As stated by Goldberg & Sifonis (1994, p237-8, cited in Conley-Taylor, 2005), in-house evaluators can be particularly important for 'institutionalising the monitoring process' and building systems to quickly respond to issues as they emerge. The above situation presents an example of this. In terms of verifying the interpretation of data with the project team, it could be argued that external consultants would undergo this process as part of their research. It is arguable as to whether this verification process would be 'easier' to undertake in-house compared with externally, dependent on the methods employed to undertake the research.

When undertaking a research project with external stakeholders, accessibility is likely to be equally difficult if undertaken internally or externally, however undertaking such research internally would allow a relationship to build with stakeholders from the onset, rather than after initial contact has been made from an external consultant. This concept is discussed in further detail below.

Intellectual property and depth of understanding gathered

A key advantage cited by DPI staff with respect to undertaking evaluation or social research in-house is that raw data can be interpreted first-hand by the practitioners who will be using the data, meaning also that *all* of the intellectual property stays within the organisation rather than with the consultants. As one DPI manager suggested:

"At the end of the research, the consultants held a lot of the intellectual property in their heads simply because they had undertaken the research. We had to rely on them to relay the information and interpretation of data to us."

Through undertaking the research first hand, DPI practitioners and engagement officers were able to “hear the responses from the source’s mouth and gauge the overall tone of engagement” in terms of the tone of voice, level of enthusiasm related to involvement and collaboration with the project - aspects that can inherently be difficult to relay second-hand. Staff also felt that there was a greater opportunity to delve deeper into issues or interesting pieces of information as they were brought up during the research. When undertaken externally, staff felt this opportunity was lost.

“... because our eyes were not looking at the data or our ears hearing the responses we could not probe further into areas that we were interested in...so there is a possibility that some insights were not picked up”

Where DPI officers were required to use research findings to engage with a particular stakeholder group, it was seen by staff to be particularly advantageous to undertake the research themselves. This approach may also help to increase ownership and use of research findings through participation. However, one staff member raised the issue of the potential influence that DPI may have by undertaking its own research on stakeholders, questioning:

“Do stakeholders give external researchers more honest answers? Do they feel that when speaking to DPI staff that they need to give the answer that they know they’re supposed to give, but not necessarily true...”

In terms of undertaking social research in-house, an internal practitioner may have a greater knowledge of the project needs, but consideration should be given to their level of expertise relating to survey design, information capture, and analysis techniques. Adequate support and/ or mentoring should be available from other experienced practitioners within the organisation. If these mechanisms are lacking, an external evaluation consultant may be better placed to bring a higher level of technical experience to the project.

Understanding of internal policies and programs

Every organisation and Government department is affected by both internal and external factors, be it policies, resourcing issues or changing program objectives. DPI staff who had undertaken social or evaluation research internally felt that this first hand knowledge of policies and projects gave them the benefit of ‘insider knowledge’ - an awareness of factors that ultimately affect the outcomes of a projects that an external evaluator otherwise may not be privy to. For example, one DPI staff member commented that because he had an insight into the internal factors that were

affecting the project he was evaluating, he was able to incorporate this knowledge into the Review.

He comments:

“A lot of managers were taken away from the project in the first year of project implementation, so essentially the project was free-wheeling with not a lot of management. This had a lot of flow on effects which I was able to factor into the Review to explain some of the outcomes.”

Conley-Tyler (2005) supports the notion that an internal evaluator is better placed to understand the environment (Shapiro & Blackwell 1987 in Conley-Taylor 2005), because they know the ‘nuances’ of the organisation and are able to identify how the evaluation could make a difference as well as how to promote the findings (Weiss, 1972, p37-9, cited in Conley-Tyler, 2005).

This insider knowledge was also seen as a benefit in terms of gathering data that could be more tightly aligned with project needs. Where one DPI staff member was required to use data from an analysis and report produced by an external consultant, they commented

“Some of the interpreted results and recommendations did not meet OUR requirements...they were important to the industry but not something that this area of DPI could do anything about...”

This view held by internal practitioners is apparently not uncommon. Research undertaken by Shaw and Faulkner (2006, p58) into evaluation and research that is small scale and carried out by professionals directly involved in the on-ground delivery of services, found that several negative characteristics were mentioned by internal evaluators or researchers about academic (external) research, including ‘limitations of understanding, experience and grasp’. Shaw and Faulkner (2006) caution these views, in terms of potentially limiting the opportunity or efforts to broaden exposure to methods and approaches employed in the wider evaluation community and develop conversations between internal-external, public-private, or academic-practitioner evaluation practitioners.

Building partnerships from the onset

In cases where a social or stakeholder analysis research was undertaken by internal practitioners, DPI staff felt that it was particularly advantageous to be able to build relationships with the stakeholders from the very beginning of the project. Where an external provider had undertaken the research on the project’s behalf, staff felt that the opportunity to establish relationships from the onset was lost. As one DPI officer explained:

“...with the external provider being the go-between for DPI, the opportunity to establish initial relationships with the key contacts was lost. Therefore, when it came to using the results and trying to engage, DPI had to start the process again... Also, as the provider did the interviews over the phone, there was a sense of obscurity... which made engagement between a government agency (already viewed sceptically) and the stakeholder a little tougher.”

Building internal capacity versus exposure to external expertise

A persuasive argument for undertaking evaluation or social research in-house is the opportunity to increase organisational and individual capacity. One DPI manager explained:

“...the advantage of undertaking research internally is the opportunity to build skills in-house. With the research that was undertaken into the (industry), the officer was able to learn as she went.”

In a review of Sonnichsen's (2000) publication 'High Impact Internal Evaluation', Lyle (2000, p286) references Sonnichsen's notion that '*internal evaluators are teachers in a learning organisation*' - that the practice of internal evaluation can act as a basis for organisational learning, to detect and solve problems and act as a self-correcting mechanism to stimulate debate and reflection within organisations.

However, to undertake internal evaluation or social research, there must first be a sound base of evaluation knowledge and expertise, such that internal practitioners can learn and apply relevant methodologies and approaches. If a sound base of evaluation expertise and knowledge is lacking, then as Shaw & Faulkner (2006, pp52) point out, approaches can lead to "*a dependence on advice of others that make the methodological coherence and strength of (internal) project methodology somewhat fragile*". This is where some DPI staff referred to the advantage of working with external consultants. As one staff member stated "*I probably didn't have the expertise that external providers have*". Other staff also cited the opportunity to bring "*new approaches, methodologies and perspectives to the organisation*" by engaging an external evaluation or social research professional.

Miller, Kobayashi & Noble (2006) elaborate on the partnership approach and suggest combining both internal capacity building and external expertise, where professional (external) evaluators provide the more complex evaluation/research services, such as instrument design, data collection protocols, data analysis and the reporting of results, while internally practitioners build on the skills

that are more easily taught and useful to them. Further to this, Pakula (2008) suggests that an organisation can build important project management skills in-house as part of managing an external contract, to build capacity in areas of planning, design and establishment of project management structures and frameworks. This is perhaps an area that is currently overlooked when considering whether to undertake a project internally or externally and could be given greater consideration.

Delivering unpalatable messages and a question of bias

Delivering a 'warts and all' evaluation can be equally difficult for internal and external evaluators, however DPI staff (particularly managers who were interviewed) felt that this was more difficult for staff undertaking an evaluation in-house:

"There's a certain amount of pressure to please (for internal practitioners) so that they don't become the 'black sheep' of the organisation."

Shaw & Faulkner (2006) reiterate this view, stating that there is always the risk of marginalisation for internal evaluators, resulting mainly from the fact that, for better or worse, people in authority and power shape decisions regarding access, methods and use of evaluation results. As one manager suggested:

"The decision whether to undertake a piece of work internally or externally has to depend on the culture of the organisation...If undertaking internally, the evaluator needs to be senior enough to 'push back' if there is pressure to suppress findings."

Likewise if a project was particularly long-standing or political, managers conceded that they would endeavour to engage an external consultant to undertake it or an internal practitioner who was removed enough to reduce the potential for bias. One DPI manager stated:

"I would try and get an external consultant or someone internal who wasn't close to the project so that they didn't have any preconceived ideas... removed from the project to reduce bias."

Weiss (1972, p38, cited in Conley-Tyler, 2005) suggests that an external evaluator is in a better position to raise issues that would be uncomfortable for an internal evaluator to broach, as there can be both professional and social consequences for an internal practitioner if he or she criticises a colleague or project. *'The role of internal evaluator is difficult because not only is the program 'paymaster' it is also the social environment of the evaluator'* (Scriven, 1997, cited in Conley-Tyler, 2005). Shaw & Faulkner (2006) go further than this, to say that the tendency for (internal)

evaluation practitioners to be marginalised means their survival-capacity at that organisation is at constant risk. However, as cited by one DPI manager and supported through Weiss (1972 in Conley-Tyler 2005), there may also be pressure on externals to give favourable results *“to help secure future work”*

This suggests a disadvantage of having a more intimate knowledge of a project or organisation’s political environment, in that there may be greater tendency to be influenced by internal politics or an affiliation with a project or its people, therefore potentially reducing objectivity. However, this could have an equal and opposite affect. Knowing a project and its people may mean knowing it as a poor project that is badly managed and therefore having the opportunity to bring this ‘insider’ knowledge into the evaluation to instigate change and improvement.

As mentioned previously, issues relating to internal evaluators are not necessarily exclusive to them but may also affect external evaluators (either to the project or the organisation) if they become internalised or well-known to a particular project.

Time considerations and constraints

Beyond the advantages cited with undertaking an evaluation in-house, are the logistics of undertaking the task. A number of staff referred to the large time commitment required to undertake a social network analysis or evaluation:

“Undertaking the evaluation internally did take up significantly more time.”

The issue of staff being sidelined to other projects was also mentioned as a significant factor affecting the completion of in-house evaluations. One evaluator reflected:

“Because of other work commitments (and being tasked to other priority work), I couldn’t commit the needed resources to the project, meaning that there was a three to four month slippage in delivery”.

With these factors in mind, it is equally important not to under-estimate the time involved in managing a contract with an external consultant. As one DPI staff member reflected:

“I really needed to consult more with the stakeholder and the consultant to manage each relationship more effectively.... I also should have pushed the consultant harder in terms of meeting timelines.”

Importance of partnerships

A key theme that emerged from the interviews with DPI staff, was the near necessity of building cooperative, strong relationships with a consultant when managing an external contract. Feasibly one might question how a piece of evaluation or social research could be undertaken successfully by an external consultant if the approach were not, at least in part, in partnership with the commissioner. As Pakula (2008, p5) suggests, both consultants and project managers (commissioners) have a mutual interest in the success of the project and therefore an incentive to build good relationships which extend beyond merely 'client-provider' relationships. He suggests: *'An evaluation is a journey, consisting of a partnership between evaluator / consultant and the client / project manager'*.

This view was not only reiterated by DPI staff involved in the interviews, but was also highlighted by McGeary (2008) who detailed common 'pitfalls and pratfalls' encountered when managing external contracts. The solution for many of these encounters was firmly grounded in building firm partnerships and focusing on *'relationship management rather than contract management'* to ensure the project's success.

The importance of sound preparation, regular communication and close management between commissioner and external evaluator is critical for project success and can lead to other benefits such as capacity building and exposure to the broader evaluation community.

CONCLUSIONS

In all cases, staff conceded that the findings from the projects referred to in this paper had been used, albeit to various extents, but there have been a number of factors and considerations detailed by staff, and supported through the literature that are worthy for consideration when deciding whether to undertake an evaluation or social research in-house or externally.

Firstly, consideration should be given to how 'external' an evaluator needs to be (or seen to be) in terms of bringing objectivity to a project. The potential for bias and the difficulties associated with delivering an unpalatable message is an issue faced by both internal and external evaluators and possibly comes down to the level of objectivity held personally by an individual. For politically sensitive projects, or those with a large public investment, a higher degree of perceived objectivity afforded by an external consultant may be worthwhile. However, the opportunity to unearth issues embedded deep within a project witnessed or experienced by an internal or 'internalised' evaluator should not be discounted.

Knowledge and accessibility of a team can be an advantage to internal evaluators in terms of time efficiency and depth of understanding of project needs, particularly for more discrete projects. However, these should not be seen as limiting factors in an external evaluation if good project management protocols are in place.

Although maintaining intellectual property, building relationships with stakeholders from the onset and fostering internal capacity are important considerations with respect to undertaking evaluation or social research internally, consideration should also be given to the level of support and expertise available to an internal practitioner. Particularly where internal expertise is lacking, the opportunity to learn research, analysis and project management skills by working in partnership with an external consultancy should not be discounted. Managing an evaluation or social research internally or externally takes a considerable amount of time. Therefore the decision to undertake the task internally or externally should not be based solely on this factor, but regarded within the context of other considerations outlined.

The findings from the interviews with staff and the literature clearly highlight the importance and value of a partnership approach between commissioner and external consultant and the associated benefits in terms of resource management, contracting specialised skills for evaluation and research design, methodology and analysis, as well as the opportunity for the commissioning organisation to build internal capacity in research and project management skills.

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