



Gathering evidence; using data

The implications and advantages for undertaking evaluation research in-house

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Introduction

- What's the paper about?...*
- Examines the benefits and implications for undertaking evaluation and social research in-house and externally
 - Based on the experiences of a sample of DPI staff who had undertaken the research directly, had managed a contract, or were required to use the research findings for engagement

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Gathering the information

Where has the data come from and who's opinion is that?...

- Ten DPI staff took part in short survey/interview regarding their experiences with undertaking, commissioning or using evaluation and/or social research in-house or externally
- Staff represented various portfolios and projects...
- The findings from the research projects discussed had been put to use (to various extents), but
- There were both benefits and implications for the approaches used...

In-house or externally...

When is an evaluation internal or external?...

- **Internal** - any staff directly involved in the project under evaluation, or in the agency in which the program is housed... (Kendall-Tackett, 2005)
- **External** - any individual not directly employed by the organisation under evaluation



Considerations, implications, advantages...

When is an evaluation internal or external?...

- But what about when DPI practitioners are seen as external...?
"Even though we are seen as internal evaluators, we are external to the projects...", or
- When external consultants become 'internalised'...

In-house or externally...

Knowledge and accessibility to project and/or stakeholders?...



- Benefit of knowing the project teams
"There were efficiencies with implementing the evaluation internally because I knew the organisation and the people I needed to speak to"
- Involving the project team in the evaluation
"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"

Considerations, implications, advantages...

Knowledge and accessibility to project and/or stakeholders?...

- **Knowing the projects teams and managers** advantageous for internal practitioners in terms of time efficiency but shouldn't be a limiting factor...
- **Involving the project team in the evaluation** is important for 'institutionalising' monitoring and addressing issues as they emerge (Goldberg & Sifonis, 1994)
 - Easier for an internal practitioner ?? Still possible for an external consultant.
 - Verifying the interpretation of data undertaken by internal and external practitioners and arguable whether 'easier' for one versus the other

In-house or externally...

Intellectual property and depth of understanding...

- **Raw data can be interpreted first hand.**
"The consultants held a lot of the intellectual property in their heads simply because they had undertaken the research..."
- **By undertaking research directly...**
 - hear and interpret responses first-hand
 - Delve deeper into issues as they were raised
 - Less likely to miss insights
 - Increase ownership and use of results

Considerations, implications, advantages...

Intellectual property and depth of understanding...



- **Influence on participants**

"Do stakeholders give external researchers more honest answers? Do they feel when speaking to DPI that they need to give the answer they feel they're supposed to give..."

- **The level of internal expertise available**

- Is there adequate support available from experienced practitioners?

- If support lacking, external consultant may be in better placed to provide the level of expertise required

In-house or externally...

Understanding of internal policies and programs?...



- **First-hand knowledge of policies and program and the benefit of 'insider knowledge'**

"A lot of managers were taken away from the project in the first year..., 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"

- **Insider knowledge and the benefit of gathering data more closely aligned with project needs**

"Some of the interpreted results and recommendations did not meet OUR requirements...they were important to the industry but not something (DPI) could do anything about"

Considerations, implications, advantages...

Understanding of internal policies and programs?...

- Risk of limiting opportunity to broaden knowledge and partnerships with external practitioners (Shaw and Fawcner, 2006)

In-house or externally...

Building partnerships from the onset...

Particularly with social or stakeholder research projects...

- Advantage of building relationships with stakeholders targeted for engagement from the very beginning of the project

"with the external provider being the go-between for DPI, the opportunity to establish initial relationships with key contacts was lost...when it came to using the results and trying to engage, DPI had to start the process again..."

- Engagement made a little harder due to 'sense of obscurity'



In-house or externally...

Building internal capacity versus exposure to external expertise..

- Increasing organisational and individual capacity
"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"
- 'Internal evaluators are teachers in a learning organisation' (Sonnichsen, 2000, in Lyle, 2000))

Considerations, implications, advantages...

Building internal capacity versus exposure to external expertise..

- Is there a sound base of evaluation knowledge and expertise in the organisation?
- Can lead to a dependence on others that can make internal project methodology somewhat fragile (Shaw and Faulkner, 2006,p52)
- Advantage of working with external consultants
"I probably didn't have the expertise that external providers have"
 - opportunity to bring new approaches, methods and perspectives to the project, and to the organisation
 - Combine both internal capacity building with external expertise in a partnership approach (Miller, Kobayashi & Noble, 2006)
 - Opportunity to build project management skills (Pakula, 2008)



In-house or externally...

Delivering unpalatable messages and a question of bias...

- Delivering a 'warts and all' evaluation can be equally difficult for internal or external evaluators but...

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

- Always the risk of marginalisation for internal evaluators (Shaw & Faulkner, 2006)

- Depends on the culture of the organisation

- Reducing bias for long-standing or political projects



"I would try and get an external consultant or someone internal who wasn't too close to the project so that they didn't have any pre-conceived ideas..."

Considerations, implications, advantages...

Delivering unpalatable messages and a question of bias...

- An external evaluator in a better position to raise issues that would be uncomfortable for an internal practitioner to broach (Weiss, 1972, cited in Conley-Tyler, 2005)

"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)

- Disadvantage of having more intimate knowledge of political environment

- tendency to be influenced by internal politics or affiliation with a project or its people

- Conversely, knowing a project that is performing poorly or badly managed may give an evaluator the opportunity to bring issues out...

In-house or externally...

Time considerations and constraints...

- Logistics of undertaking the task

"Undertaking the evaluation internally did take up a significant amount of time"

- Issue of being sidelined to other projects

"Because of other work commitments, I couldn't commit the needed resources to the project, meaning that there was a three to four month slippage in delivery"



Considerations, implications, advantages...

Time considerations and constraints...

- Importance of committing adequate time, skills and resources to manage an external contract

"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"

In-house or externally...

Importance of partnerships...



- Importance of strong, cooperative relationships
- Mutual interest in the success of the project
 - "An evaluation is a journey, consisting of partnership between evaluator/consultant and the client/project manager" (Pakula, 2008)*
- Building partnerships beyond just 'client-provider' relationships
 - "relationship management rather than contract management" (McGeary, 2008)*
- Benefits in terms of capacity building and exposure to broader community

In-house or externally...

Findings... Conclusions...

- Findings from the projects were used, whether undertaken internally or externally
- Number of points for consideration emerged...
- How 'external' does the evaluator need to be?
- Knowledge and accessibility to project team...
- Building relationships from the onset & fostering internal capacity

Considerations, implications, advantages...

- Conclusions*
- Consider level of support and expertise available
 - Time and resource input
 - Importance and value of a partnership approach



References

*...And
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