

Overview on Evaluation for Project Managers

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Evaluation is becoming an increasingly important activity in project management. The emphasis placed on evaluation by policy makers, funding bodies, strategists and practitioners is at an all time high. The cycle of innovating, piloting, evaluating and refining together with dissemination of the process and its outcomes is a widely accepted model of development. Yet many project managers are unclear about what evaluation actually means and, more importantly, how do they do it in practice.

A surprising number of management training courses still do not teach the skills of evaluation. Conversely, many standard textbooks on evaluation cover the theoretical aspects of the subject but not the practicalities of evaluation in the context of managing a project. Moreover, the study of evaluation is also comparatively new and there are widely differing theories, models and practices. Evaluation means different things to different people depending on their different needs. We have come across evaluation approaches that contrast starkly with our own but which are nevertheless valid and useful in particular circumstances.

What follows is one approach based on our experience and value systems. We have attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice and balance the 'how-to-do-it' sections with the 'why-to-do-it' ones. Where we have followed a particular theoretical path or have been selective in our interpretation we have tried to outline the alternative approaches and make explicit the sections where we are being prescriptive with those where we are being descriptive.

We hope that this book makes a contribution to both your knowledge and skills as well as providing you with the confidence to make your own decisions based on your own needs and those of your project. In most projects, there is only a restricted budget for evaluation activities. This guide should help you to make informed choices about how to spend that budget for optimal learning output.

Introduction

What is this evaluation about, who is it for and what does it do?

These notes have been written primarily for managers and other professionals responsible for the development and execution of projects funded by the European Commission (EC). However, much of the content will be relevant to project managers

in general and where there are references to EC specific issues, this is made explicit.¹

The purpose is to provide managers both with information *about* evaluation but also to provide practical guidelines on *how* to do it or, at least, how to organise it. For this reason, members of evaluation and review committees may also find it useful as will other project staff who have been asked to take on an internal evaluation role.

Many project managers will have made the decision to employ an external evaluator – in some cases it may be a condition of funding. However, managers should not assume that this means that they have no further responsibility for the evaluation. This handbook also includes sections on how to employ an external evaluator, how to brief them and what to expect from them. We also believe that if managers understand the evaluation process themselves, the more effective and efficient the dialogue between manager and evaluator and the better the evaluation outputs.

The key purpose of these notes is to be an entry-level guide for evaluation practitioners rather than a text-book to be read from beginning to end.² For that reason it has been designed around stand-alone sections so that users can ‘dip in’ to relevant topics. This inevitably leads to some duplication between sections. It has also been designed to be used in conjunction with the Evaluation Mentor software³ and follows the same format although both can be used independently.

What is evaluation and what it is not

There are probably as many definitions of evaluation as there are books written about it. Here are some of them.

“Evaluation is the process of making comparisons for the purpose of improving decisions.”

C.L.Taylor (1999)

“Evaluation consists of making judgments about programs based on established criteria.” Boone (1955)

“Evaluation uses a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer basic questions about a program — and to ensure that those answers are supported by evidence.” ACF Handbook 1997

“Evaluation compares what has been accomplished (evidence) with what should have been accomplished (criteria) and then makes a judgment about how well it was done.” C.L.Taylor (1998)

“Synthesizing the definitions from the major dictionaries, wetake evaluation to be the process of determining merit, worth, or significance. Evaluations are the products from this process.” Michael Scrivens 1998

¹ Because of the background of the authors and the nature of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, which part funded the production of this handbook, most of the examples are drawn from vocational education and training. However, it is equally relevant to projects in other programmes and contexts.

² There are many sophisticated books and readers on evaluation: for the interested audience we have added a reference list at the end of this guide.

³ Available free of charge on line at www.theknownet.com

“Research determines what can be done, needs assessment determines what should be done, and evaluation determines how well something has been done.”
Mendenhall (1973)

“Evaluation is the process of determining the value and effectiveness of a [learning] program. It uses assessment and validation tools to provide data for the evaluation [where]...assessment is the measurement of the practical results of the training in the work environment [and] validation determines if the objectives of the training goal were met.” Donald Clarke (1997)

We do not propose to give you another one because we have found all of these are appropriate in different circumstances. It is up to you to work with the one you find most useful for your project. However, the important ideas we can synthesize from all of them are that

- Evaluation is purposeful, it is a means to an end not an end in itself.
- Evaluation of things which have happened, helps people make decisions about the future
- Evaluation is based on asking specific questions about a project and finding the answers. It is an investigative process
- Evaluation is systematic and scientific. It involves collecting evidence, making comparisons, measuring things against criteria.
- Evaluation means that someone, ultimately, has to make judgements about the value or worth of something so its outputs must be interpretive not simply descriptive.

The last definition usefully leads us in to other, related terms, (like ‘assessment’, ‘validation’ and so on), that we need to be familiar with in order to understand how and where evaluation fits in.

What evaluation is not.

Understanding what evaluation is not, is a good starting point for understanding what it is! However, because evaluation is a relatively new field it still has an emerging vocabulary and there is considerable variation in the way the terminology is used. Some words are used interchangeably by different agencies, some concepts overlap. For the sake of consistency rather than claiming any authority, we are proposing to use terms in the sense that the European Commission typically uses them – although even that can vary from user to user.

- **Monitoring**

Monitoring is about checking – checking whether inputs match outputs, whether income balances expenditure, whether actual activity matches planned activity. It is also about recording the gaps⁴ between them. Evaluation is about explaining why the gaps exist. Monitoring is not the same as evaluation because it is descriptive rather than interpretive and is not intrinsically directed toward learning but the two are often confused. However, evaluation is almost impossible if there is no monitoring system in place.⁵

⁴ Remember, the ‘gaps’ can show over-performance as well as deficits or shortfalls and it is important to record these as the evaluation process will be interested in why this happened and whether there are factors which should influence future planning.

⁵ In the case of EU funded programmes, internal monitoring systems are the responsibility of the individual project but external monitoring will be usually be done by national agencies through their ‘monitoring visits’ or through standardised report forms. These are NOT a substitute for evaluation.

- **Capitalisation**

Capitalisation has crept into the evaluation-related vocabulary in recent years and simply means building on the achievements of a project (or programme) and using the results in future activities. Thus, project evaluation is a good baseline from which to start the capitalisation process.

- **Valorisation**

Valorisation is looking at the lessons to be learned from a project and how these can be translated into a wider context or to novel situations. Valorisation is closely related to impact analysis and is usually about the longer-term sustainability of a policy or strategy rather than a particular application. It is often used interchangeably with 'capitalisation' but is more commonly a term applied to capturing the collective learning of a group of similar projects or a whole programme rather than an individual project.

- **Auditing**

Auditing simply means 'taking stock of' and is used in this sense in expressions such as 'skills audit' or 'environmental audit' or 'audit of training needs'. However, to a project manager it usually implies an inspection of the project to determine whether financial controls are in place (systems audit) and whether these are being followed (compliance audit). In reality, the terms of reference of the European Commission's auditors or their agents are much broader. They are increasingly concerned with checking out whether there is evidence that the project was needed in the first place, whether the project represents real value for money in terms of its processes and outputs and whether there is 'added value' not only at the level of financial additionality (in a technical sense) but also whether the activity is visible and can be clearly identified in practice.⁶

- **Assessment**

The difference between assessment and evaluation causes more confusion than almost any other distinction we make. It is largely a question of language and culture and so is particularly problematic on transnational projects. In common usage British English, the terms are virtually interchangeable although 'assessment' tends to be used more in the sense of 'weighing up' or choosing between options rather than in the sense of making scientific judgements about their value or worth. However, in technical usage, particularly in education, training and HRD fields, it is almost always used to refer to the process of measuring the performance of individual staff or students.⁷ This is further complicated by the fact that in American English, assessment is often called 'Performance evaluation' and recognised as being a distinct sub-category of the overall discipline of evaluation.

So, in the context of a training project, for example, assessment will establish *what* learning took place whereas evaluation will be asking questions about *why* that happened.

⁶ A companion handbook on 'Preparing for an Audit' is under development in conjunction with Frank McKay, formerly of the Verification and Audit Section responsible for the audit of EU supported projects in the UK

⁷ For example, formally, as a result of student examinations or staff appraisal interviews or informally in the workplace.

Why do we evaluate projects?

We believe that evaluation has two main purposes, (although we are aware that others have a more sophisticated break down)⁸ and have called these the 'torch' and 'stick' approaches.

- Firstly, evaluation can be about *accountability*. It is a measuring 'stick' that can be used to justify the existence of the project in the first place, its work and its continuation. The ethos is largely inspectorial and judgmental and the underpinning rationale is about value for money, quality standards and is, effectively, a 'licence to practice' for project sponsors.
- Secondly, evaluation can be about project *improvement*. In this case it can be seen as a developmental process – a 'torch' that helps illuminate problems and recognise good practice. The ethos is diagnostic and interpretive and the underpinning rationale is about collective learning. It is a process that reduces the likelihood of repeating mistakes and using mistakes, when they happen, as critical learning incidents

Neither purpose is more, or less, valid than the other. The developmental approach is becoming the more popular of the two and many project managers are unhappy with the accountability model. Nevertheless, rigorous 'measuring stick' evaluation is essential if the public interest is to be protected. Not surprisingly, many funding bodies are more concerned with this type of evaluation but are increasingly aware that whilst it is an effective process for justifying existing expenditure, it is less effective for planning long-term investment.

There is also a case for arguing that the dividing line between the two is artificial and that any evaluation should include elements of both. This may or may not be true. However, in our experience, it is not so much that the methodologies are different but more that in the spirit in which the evaluation is conducted is different. When we ask clients – usually project managers - the fundamental question "Why do you want to evaluate your project? Is it to justify it or to improve it?" the answer is invariably "...a bit of both". Whilst that may be true, and theoretically possible, in practice it is very difficult and so our response is usually to say "Fine! But it will cost you twice as much!"

In conclusion, our approach focuses primarily on evaluation for the purposes of project improvement. This is not to say that accountability is not an issue, rather that we have chosen to focus on evaluation as a learning opportunity.

⁸ We rather like the Bramley and Newby (in Clarke, D 1995) list which identifies five main purposes of evaluation – especially number 5!

1. Feedback - Linking learning outcomes to objectives and providing a form of quality control.
2. Control - Making links from training to organizational activities and to consider cost effectiveness.
3. Research - Determining the relationships between learning, training, and the transfer of training to the job.
4. Intervention - The results of the evaluation influence the context in which it is occurring.
5. Power games - Manipulating evaluative data for organizational politics.