
Part Four - Other issues to consider

Introduction

For every evaluation you do you will have to think about a wide range of things that are out of your control, but which may affect your work.

Objectives

By the end of this part you will be able to:

- <PASSPORT> list some of the issues you need to consider when planning an evaluation
- <PASSPORT> describe how you could reduce the impact of external factors on your evaluation.



Overview

In this section we have identified nine factors which you might have to take into account. They are:

- <PASSPORT> **cause and effect**
- <PASSPORT> **impartiality**
- <PASSPORT> **logistics**
- <PASSPORT> **boundaries**
- <PASSPORT> **incompatible systems**
- <PASSPORT> **data sharing and availability**
- <PASSPORT> **lack of evaluation culture**
- <PASSPORT> **fear of failure and the blame culture**
- <PASSPORT> **hitting the balance.**



In this part we'll look at each of these factors in turn and some of the ways of minimising their impact.

A **summary** of the key points can be found on page 100.

Cause and effect

What does this mean?




The reason for evaluating a project is to measure how well the outputs have been completed and what effect they have had on the original problem.

There is a danger in assuming that the outcomes are a direct result of the project. There are lots of other things which can have an effect on outcomes and you need to be aware of them.

For example, imagine you are evaluating a project designed to reduce domestic burglary on an estate. When you measure your PIs, you find that there has been a dramatic decrease in burglaries during the life of the project. On the face of it, this looks like the result of the work carried out by the project team - whether it is fitting locks, giving advice to householders or setting up Neighbourhood Watches. Imagine that, at the same time, the two most prolific offenders on the estate have been arrested. It could be that the drop in burglaries is partly down to those arrests, rather than entirely down to the project.

What can you do?

The first thing is to be aware that an evaluation cannot be conclusive proof that a project has worked. An evaluation is an indication that a project has worked, and there are three steps you can take to make sure that the results are as accurate as possible.

-  At the **planning** stage of your evaluation, list all the factors that might have an effect on the project. For this you need to be aware of the area where the project is being carried out and what other work of a similar nature is being done in the area.
-  **Collect data** for your PIs from as wide a range of sources as possible. The wider you spread your net, the more confident you can be that the results of your evaluation are accurate.
-  Look closely at the **analysed data** to make sure that what it is telling you is a true picture of what has happened. If you spot any inconsistencies, check them out further.

When you present the findings, you should make it clear that other factors might have had a bearing on the results.

Impartiality

Why is this important?

It is vital that evaluation is a neutral process and is seen as such. There is a danger in using the same people who work on the project to evaluate it. It is very difficult for someone who has worked on a project to detach themselves from it and take an objective and impartial look at the results. The result may be that the findings are skewed or the data interpreted in a particular way.

This is unlikely to be a deliberate process, but anyone who has worked on a project will want it to succeed and will look for evidence to prove this. An independent evaluator will look to see where a project has worked and where it hasn't.

What can you do?

Ways to reduce this problem include:



use **external evaluators** on large projects



if the project team is evaluating the project, use someone from **outside the team** as a quality control check.

Logistics

We've already mentioned logistics in Part Three of this book, but it is an important part of the evaluation process and needs mentioning again.

Evaluations don't just happen, they need to be carefully planned before any work is carried out, preferably at the start of the project. The plans should show timescales and resources, so everybody is clear about what is going to be done, when it needs to be completed, who's going to do it and what it will cost.

You should make sure the **project team is aware** of the **work needed for the evaluation**, but you should also make sure the project sponsors are clear about it too.

Boundaries

What is the problem?

You may find that a common problem is that different organisations don't cover the same geographical area. A phrase you might hear is that the boundaries are 'non-coterminous'.



Why do you think this is a problem? Write your answer down in the box below and compare it with ours on the next page.



If organisations don't share the same boundaries it can cause a problem when trying to combine and compare data. This may be a problem, particularly with partnerships.

If partner organisations aren't collecting data for the same geographical areas it is difficult to make exact comparisons. This can lead to the results of data analysis becoming distorted.

What can you do?

The first thing you should do is **identify the impact of any missing data** and what distortion this might have on your analysis. If the impact is large you might have to **gather data from other organisations** not involved in the project, or collect it yourself.

You also need to be careful when analysing the data to make sure that you don't include information from areas outside the project.

Incompatible systems




This is another common problem when working in partnerships. When agencies use different systems for collecting information it may be difficult to share data easily. It generally means that data has to be put into a common format and analysed again before direct comparisons can be made.

Another problem is that there may be some gaps, where additional data has to be collected.

You may also find that other organisations use terms and phrases in different ways. You need to make sure that **everyone involved understands and uses terms and phrases in the same way.**

Data sharing and availability

Sometimes you may have problems getting hold of the data you need or in sharing it between partners. There are several possible reasons for this:

-  lack of an evaluation culture may mean the data isn't collected in the first place
-  there may be some suspicion about why the data is needed and how it is going to be used
-  there may be concerns about confidentiality.




Although this problem is becoming less common, the situation may need careful handling. One way of doing this is to have a **data sharing agreement** between the partners. The agreement would set out what data is to be collected, how it is going to be used and how it will be presented.

Lack of evaluation culture

What does this mean?

Quite simply it means that some agencies, groups or organisations do not have a background of evaluating and monitoring their work.

This can cause several problems:

-  people won't understand the purpose of evaluation or see the need for it
-  lack of understanding may slow down the progress of evaluation
-  some data may not be available as agencies might not have seen the need to collect it in the past.

What can you do?

You can do two things in this situation. The first is to spend some time **'selling' the idea to your partners** and educating them about the process. Quite often, the language of evaluation can be quite intimidating, so this needs to be explained too.

The second thing you can do is to **involve the partners in the process of evaluation**. Getting people working on an evaluation is a good way of making the process clear. It will help them to understand the importance of effective evaluation.

Fear of failure and the blame culture

What does this mean?

As you've seen in this book, the purpose of an evaluation is to measure the achievements of a project, or the effectiveness of its processes. However, this won't be the view of everyone you deal with.

You will find some people aren't used to having their work measured and feel uncomfortable with the idea. Evaluation is often viewed with great suspicion and you may meet with some hostility when developing your evaluation plans. It can be seen by some as a way of identifying and punishing poor work. This is particularly the case when an organisation is seen to be operating a blame culture.

The fear of failure and the blame culture makes it difficult to establish clear objectives for the evaluation and the accurate measuring and reporting of results.

What can you do?

The answer to this problem lies in **communicating your purpose clearly** and educating people about the importance and purpose of evaluation.

If you are likely to have problems of this sort, it is a good idea to have a **period of consultation with management**, the **people involved** in the project and trade unions. The aim should be to reach a **common agreement about the need for evaluation** and how it will be carried out.

Hitting the balance

In many organisations it is difficult getting people to support evaluation or monitoring work. But once you have gained people's support you may be faced with the opposite problem.

There is a danger that evaluation can take over a project and people spend more time on the details of the evaluation rather than on what the results are telling them.

There is a need to **balance what you need** from the evaluation **against the time and resources** you can put in to it. It is here that having really **clear objectives** and a **plan** for the evaluation become really important.

Summary - Part Four

This section looked at some of the wide range of factors that might affect your evaluation work. It suggested ways you could reduce the impact of some external factors on your evaluation.

Cause and effect - Make sure that the data you've analysed presents a true picture of what has happened.

Impartiality - Evaluation is a neutral process – an independent evaluator will be able to see where a project has worked and where it hasn't.

Logistics - Evaluations need careful planning before you start.

Boundaries - Different organisations may cover different geographical areas. This may cause problems when you try to combine and compare data, it might distort the results of your data analysis.

Incompatible systems - Different organisations may use different systems for collecting data, which may make it difficult to share data easily.

Data sharing and availability - You may find it difficult to get hold of the data you need or share it with partners. This might be because data isn't collected, there is suspicion about why the data is needed or how it is going to be used. There may be concerns about confidentiality.

Lack of evaluation culture - Some organisations are not used to monitoring and evaluating their work. This may mean that people don't understand why evaluation is important, which may slow things down.

Fear of failure and the blame culture - Fear of failure and blame cultures can make it difficult to establish clear objectives and accurately measure and report results. Evaluation is often viewed with suspicion because it is seen as a way of identifying and punishing poor work.

Hitting the balance - Once you've gained people's support, there is a danger that the evaluation takes over the project and people spend more time on the evaluation than what the results are telling them.

...finally

Congratulations! You've now completed the **Passport to Evaluation**. We hope you found it useful and that you feel more confident about evaluating projects.

Below are the objectives for this book. You might want to spend a few minutes checking that it has helped you achieve them all. Hopefully you will be able to:

- <PASSPORT> define evaluation and monitoring
- <PASSPORT> explain why crime reduction work should be evaluated
- <PASSPORT> describe some different types of evaluation
- <PASSPORT> describe how evaluation fits in as part of the process of project planning
- <PASSPORT> describe the process for evaluating a project
- <PASSPORT> evaluate a crime reduction project using the process
- <PASSPORT> list some of the issues you need to consider when planning an evaluation
- <PASSPORT> identify skills and knowledge which you can take back to your own work.

This book is an introduction to evaluation, and should help you make a start on evaluating projects. Hopefully you will now get the opportunity to practice some of the skills you have learned, as this will help you become more confident about evaluating projects.

Good luck!

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