



Program Evaluation, Another Tool for Managers

“We learn about the quality of a decision by observing its results. We learn most about the quality of a decision if we deliberately, systematically assess its impact or outcomes.”

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What is program evaluation?

Program evaluation is a method used to provide specific information about a clinical or administrative initiative's activities, outcomes, costs and effectiveness in meeting goals. A “program” is a set of activities developed to accomplish one or more goals. Program evaluations vary in the technical complexity and sophistication of their research designs. While some evaluations require complex technologies and research methodologies such as those conducted by HSR&D, other evaluations may require management expertise.

In theory, all programs are candidates for evaluation, although any number of barriers can undermine the utility of an evaluation's findings. These barriers may include: the political environment, the cost of the evaluation (relative to its potential benefit), the time involved and the study design.

Why is program evaluation important to managers?

Ideally, program evaluation determines if an initiative is meeting its stated objectives and, if relevant, those of the larger organization. Program evaluations may also assess the feasibility and implementation of proposals for new, similar programs. As programs mature, occasional or ongoing evaluation can identify potential adjustments for managers.

Potential limitations that managers should be aware of regarding program evaluations include: conditional conclusions, timeliness, bias, corruption of measures, applicability, invalid and unreliable data and unintended effects.

When and how often should program evaluation be done?

In an ideal world, program evaluation should be an ongoing process. At a minimum, managers should make evaluation decisions on three occasions during a program's life span, when:

- the program is being designed and first implemented;
- the program or its environment is scheduled to change in some significant way; and when
- alternative programs show promise for achieving better results (outcomes or cost), or when the program's effectiveness is being questioned.

What are the steps in planning a program evaluation?

While there is no cookbook approach, several steps are common to program evaluations. Evaluation plans generally include these elements:

1. Identify the key user of the evaluation. Identifying decision maker(s), purposes and applications of the evaluation plus formulating evaluation question(s) at evaluation outset are critical to success. Well constructed research questions address project needs, processes, and effectiveness, as well as cost effectiveness.
2. Judge the value of a full assessment by conducting a brief pre-evaluation assessment that will clarify potential quality and utility of a program evaluation.
3. Conduct a review of the relevant refereed literature, contact administrative peers for opinion, then determine whether this information answers the preliminary questions.
4. Determine the evaluation design based on the questions being asked and the degree of methodological rigor required to draw valid inferences.
5. Develop the interim communication process, scope and depth of the final report plus the ultimate dissemination plan.

What resources are needed to conduct a program evaluation?

- **Evaluation team:** A team contains internal or external staff, or a combination overseen by a principal investigator, or one or more mid-level coordinators. The range of research disciplines and questions asked will determine the exact makeup of the evaluation team.
- **Data:** Program evaluation requires data, whether qualitative or quantitative, pre-program baseline data greatly improves the evaluators' ability to draw valid conclusions.
- **Time:** The evaluation plan must realistically identify start dates, interim milestones, and end dates.
- **Funding:** Evaluation costs vary. Using outside evaluators or purchased review data can affect the evaluation budget. Regardless of costs, evaluators must explicitly identify and separate evaluation costs from the costs of running the program.

Research findings:

The projects and their impacts described below exemplify the range of recent and ongoing HSR&D program evaluations.

- **Evaluating and Improving Pressure Ulcer Care.** This project evaluated the use of the Patient Assessment File, a VA administrative database, as a quality improvement tool for preventing pressure ulcers among patients in long-term care facilities. Using this database, researchers developed a model for a successful quality improvement program that has substantially lowered the incidence of pressure ulcer development at a number of VA long-term care facilities. *Berlowitz DR, Halpern J. Evaluating and improving pressure ulcer care: the VA experience with administrative data. Joint Commission Journal on Quality Improvement 1997; 23: 424-33.*
- **Twelve-Step and Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment for Substance Abuse.** This comparative evaluation provided important evidence on the effectiveness of 12-step treatment for substance abuse, compared with cognitive-behavioral treatment. Nearly 3,700 patients from 15 VA inpatient programs were involved in this study, which showed that patients treated through 12-step programs fared as well as those who received cognitive-behavioral treatment. *Quimette PC, Finney JW, Moos RH. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology 1997; 65(2): 230-240.*
- **Evaluation of the Comprehensive Women Veterans Health Centers.** Since their establishment in 1994, women veterans health centers have succeeded in providing comprehensive and needed physical and mental health care services to women veterans, this evaluation concluded. Using a structured instrument to collect data on the centers' operations, the program evaluators noted that many centers experienced substantial growth during the two-year observation period and became highly visible in the communities they served.

They described the centers as a "strong representation of VA's commitment to equal treatment for women veterans." Weiss TW, Wray NP, Mansyur C. *Final Report: Women Veterans Health Program. Houston Center for Quality of Care and Utilization Studies. VA HSR&D Field Program: Houston, July 15, 1996.*

- **Evaluation of VA Major Depressive Disorder Clinical Guidelines Implementation.** This ongoing evaluation is assessing the effectiveness of VA's implementation of clinical practice guidelines for major depression and the impact on patient outcomes, quality of care and resource use. Post-implementation data will be compared with pre-implementation data from four VAMCs. This study holds promise for improving the processes of care used to treat depression and for increasing the use of guidelines by physicians.

Selected sources for program evaluation information:

- Rossi PH, Freeman HE. *Evaluation: a systematic approach*, 5th Edition. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1993.
- Shadish WR, Cook TD, Leviton LC. *Foundations of program evaluation: theories of practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991.
- Yin RK. *Case study research: design and methods*, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994.

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The Research and Development web page contains a downloadable PDF version of the primer: *Program Evaluation for Managers*, by William Yeaton, et al. Boston, MA: The Management Decision & Research Center, 1997. 22 Pages. <http://www.va.gov/resdev/prt>

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