

11 hints for a successful evaluation

- 1. Make clear the unclear from the start:** Any of the following should be clarified before the evaluation commences: What exactly is to be evaluated? Why is the evaluation being undertaken? How will the findings be used? What is the timeframe for the evaluation – and the time period of the activity being evaluated?
- 2. Learn about what you are evaluating from the start:** An evaluator should evaluate an activity with as much background knowledge as possible. Learn about an activity from background documents but also from people who know the activity and understand it better than you.
- 3. Invest in planning:** The single most important step will be in defining what you will evaluate and how you will go about it. Set milestones and phases and try to stick to them.
- 4. Verify verify verify:** Many an evaluation has been discredited by simple factual errors in the findings. Do not hesitate to ask for clarification on your findings. Share informally some of your main findings with selected stakeholders to understand better if your interpretation is on track or not.
- 5. Communicate communicate communicate:** Many an evaluation has also failed to live up to expectations due to miscommunications within the evaluation team, between the team and the commissioning body and stakeholders. Communication within a team is essential but so is providing regular feedback during the evaluation to the very people who have asked you to do the job. Respondents also have to understand why they are participating.
- 6. Collect only information you need:** evaluators have a tendency to collect more information than they need and consequently find themselves drowning in data. Keep a check at all times as to what you are actually seeking information on. Don't bother respondents with too many questions of which their responses you may never use.
- 7. Expect the unexpected:** Hopefully a well prepared evaluation sets off with a prepared set of questions and an idea of where the answers can be found. However, in collecting the information, an evaluator may discover a new source not planned or a new avenue to explore not envisaged previously.

«The owl can see that which others cannot; which is the essence of true wisdom» (ancient lore)

8. Report your findings in a brief illustrative way: Many a hefty evaluation report has gathered dust due to its overbearing attention to details. Assume that most people won't read your report but will scan through the executive summary - their attention caught by a graph or chart. Most people will learn of the findings through informal discussions or presentations.

9. Don't hide the limits of your evaluation: An evaluation cannot evaluate every aspect of an activity. Evaluators must be open in what their evaluation is not evaluating and explain limitations encountered, in terms of access and resources, in their findings.

10. Don't be disappointed if nothing happens immediately with your findings: Today most evaluations produce actionable recommendations that seem straight-forward but may be difficult for organizations to implement immediately. Often the greatest effects of the evaluation may be far from the activity being assessed.

11. Give something back for all that you are taking: In their wake, evaluations leave a debris of ideas and discussions that may never move forward for many respondents and stakeholders. Make available a summary of your findings for all those addressed by your evaluation if only to show how the information you collected has been used.

Owl Research & Evaluation supports organisations in analysing, assessing and evaluating activities in the communications, training/events and development fields. Contact Glenn O'Neil, Owl RE for further information: 41 (0) 76 325 6213, oneil@owlre.com

«The owl can see that which others cannot; which is the essence of true wisdom» (ancient lore)