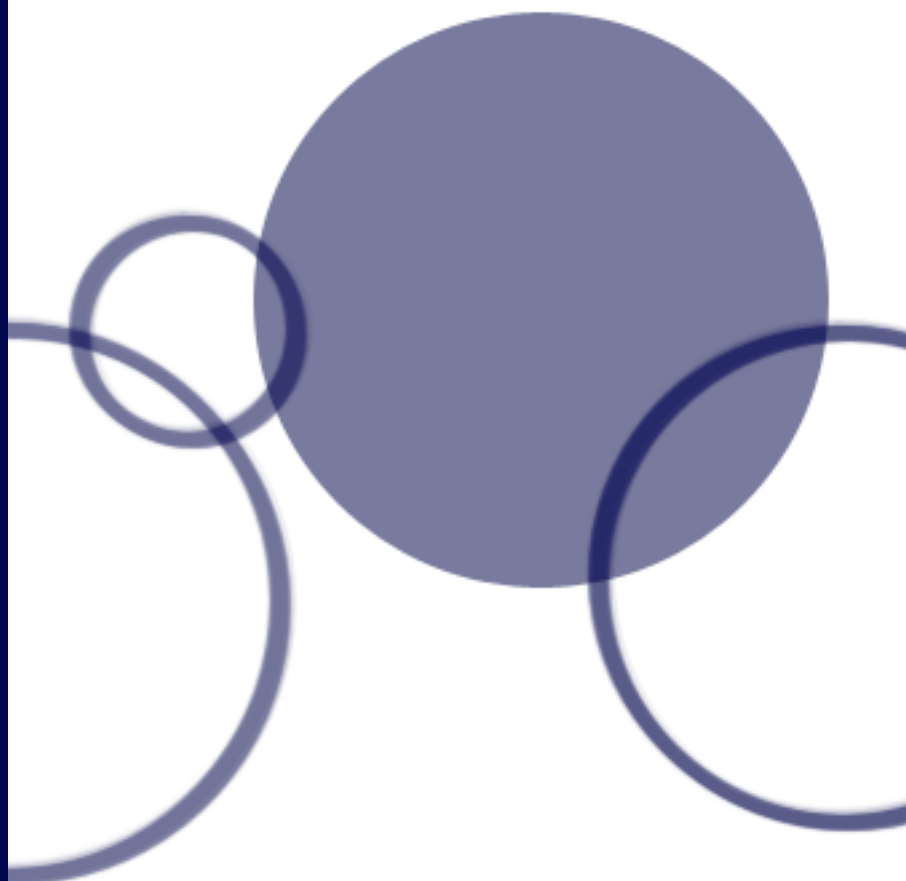


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Monitoring and evaluation: difficulties & possibilities.

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Background

In the next section this document provides some ideas about good evaluation and monitoring strategies. However it is difficult to discuss these without first commenting on what can make evaluation and monitoring difficult, and why some seemingly obvious strategies aren't suitable.

Am I working too much?

To illustrate what makes evaluation and monitoring difficult it may help if we explore a simple example: I want to know whether I am working too much – and to use monitoring and evaluation strategies to help me find out.

It might seem that we should use the following steps:

- 1) Define objectives and indicators in order to clarify 'too much'.
- 2) Measure whether objectives are met and whether indicators are present.
- 3) Use this evidence to answer the question.

Would this work for me?

I could define 'too much' as being 50 hours per week, or as working so hard that I am describing myself as "extremely tired" more than one night per month. And I would then need to record how many hours I work, and to write down how I feel each night.

Of course real life isn't that simple. Do I record chatting to a work contact about her family as work or not? What about watching a relevant TV programme in the evening? And could it be that when I'm enjoying my work I record that I'm less tired than I actually am?

Objectives

- working no more than 10 hours each day
- only working more than 50 hours in a week once per month
- stopping work by 7pm on 4 days out of 5 days
- 90% of nights I record that I am 'a little tired' or better
- I record that I am 'extremely tired' on fewer than 1 night per month

An independent person might help a little. She might be able to collect extra information. Perhaps my children would reply more honestly to a stranger than to me. Perhaps she'd be able to highlight inconsistency in how I record different information.

But here is a real problem; even if I manage to record accurate data I'm not actually much closer to answering the original question.

I still don't know whether I'm working too much. All I've actually found out is whether I'm working within the limits that I've set myself. This may well be useful, but it doesn't answer the question, even to my own satisfaction. 'Too much' will always depend on a whole range of other factors that I haven't recorded.

Then there's yet another, even bigger, problem; even if I manage to come up with a comprehensive definition of 'too much' for myself, my children's definition would be different. As of course would the opinion of anyone else. And each opinion will depend on the particular viewpoint of that individual. There is no neutral standpoint from which to judge – no absolute scale against which to compare data – no accepted measure of what 'too much' looks like.

Bread for the Blond

Clearly it is difficult to answer the question "am I working too much?" But what about the kinds of question that we're more likely to tackle for real? What about questions like: "are we doing good?" "are we helping people?" or "is the help we provide worth the money it costs?" Of course, these are even more complicated. A second short (and fictitious) example should illustrate this.

"Bread for the Blond" is a voluntary sector project working in a city where people with blond hair are excluded and left starving on the streets. They provide food and basic shelter for blond people and they campaign for their better treatment.



To monitor the quality of their service Bread for the Blond issue questionnaires to those they help. These ask about satisfaction with the service, whether staff and volunteers have been respectful, and

whether their food has been of good quality. This monitoring strategy allows the service to notice when something changes – for instance when there is a bad batch of bread or an unusually rude staff member.

When Bread for the Blond is evaluated they seek out an independent viewpoint. The evaluation investigates whether the service is doing what it said it would, and whether it is working smoothly and efficiently. The independence of the evaluation team means that they are more easily able to see potential improvements in structure or to raise issues regarding management practices.

Generally, the project finds that evaluations can be an uncomfortable experience. Some of the issues they raise can be difficult to deal with – for instance where it is apparent that individual practice needs to change.

What seems important to the project is that both monitoring and evaluation highlight that blond people appreciate the service and that other people speak highly of it.

Bread for the Blond is proud of its work.

Problems with this scenario

We can identify very many problems with this scenario. Just a few are described below.

Bread for the Blond provides a meagre level of support - but it goes to a group of people who are disempowered and desperate. Therefore the positive user questionnaires are almost meaningless. The most that could be said is that they give a general indication that the project isn't being consistently and obviously abusive to people.

It can be useful for the project to find out whether it is doing what it said it would – and whether it could improve on its efficiency or on its internal functioning. But the real questions that need to be answered aren't about efficiency and functioning. They are much more profound. For instance:

Could it be that a result of the work of Bread for the Blond is that people who have blond hair are hidden from society? Could it be that Bread for the Blond's work means that people starve slowly in special places, not more quickly and obviously outside supermarkets? Is it possible that Bread for the Blond get in the way

of the general public getting to know people with blond hair? Could these things be preventing real change?

Is it possible that the manner of the project staff, while better than that of the general public, is still patronising enough to add to people's disempowerment? Would the money that Bread for the Blond spend on food and shelter be better spent in subsidising people with blond hair who get together to campaign for change?

Is it possible that Bread for the Blond have a good reputation partly because their work doesn't challenge some of society's more deeply held beliefs? Is it possible that their success has been due to them receiving funding in preference to projects with a more radical approach?

Of course these are profoundly difficult questions to answer, but they are of huge importance and are the very questions that monitoring and evaluation strategies must wrestle with.

Some simple conclusions

This scenario raises some extremely complicated issues (without easy answers), but a few simple points can be made:

- Measures of service-user satisfaction and reputation are of very limited use in analysing the work of many projects.
- Measures of quantity of work – for instance number of clients – are of very limited use in analysing the work of many projects.
- We must be extraordinarily careful with these kinds of measure because their interpretation seems so obvious that they can directly influence a project's work.
- The 'independence' of evaluators isn't the same thing as their neutrality. In many instances it isn't possible for evaluation to be carried out from a neutral viewpoint. The popular image of a blindfolded (neutral) figure of justice weighing facts against each other isn't appropriate.
- Good monitoring and evaluation will involve very much more than judgements about whether a project is doing what it said it would do.



- Good monitoring and evaluation must define the values that lay behind conclusions and must justify why this is a fair foundation on which to make judgements.
- Monitoring and evaluation might need to assess evidence from more than one perspective – for instance how much harm is caused as well as how much 'good' is done (because 'good' and 'harm' can occur simultaneously).

Better solutions

These problems do not make monitoring and evaluation impossible – just difficult. It is apparent that good evaluation and monitoring strategies will need to be creative, and will need to recognise the complexity of the problem. At first glance this may seem to be a 'bad thing' – simply making life more complicated – but actually there are some big advantages. Being forced to discard some more standard approaches can free us to work more effectively.

- Because we are abandoning the myth that evaluation can be carried out in a neutral and objective way, evaluators no longer need to remain uninvolved and to judge from afar. Instead, support and development work can be carried out as an inherent part of an evaluation.
- Typically a problem with any evaluation is that its most important conclusions may be those that a project is least likely or able to deal with. It can be precisely because the project isn't able to deal with an issue or isn't able to see a point of view that it has become an issue. If these difficult conclusions are raised in a final presentation or report they are often either ignored, or there are negative effects. More flexibility makes it possible to introduce difficult issues in more constructive ways.
- Because better evaluations focus on bigger questions, the experience of 'being evaluated' can be much more positive. An organisation can be encouraged to work together on a set of external challenges, rather than having to concentrate so strongly on internal matters about efficiency or management. Of course a team working together on bigger questions may also be better able to tackle difficult questions about these other matters.
- Monitoring strategies – if we are imaginative in their creation – can be used as a powerful part of motivating and directing the project's work. Rather than monitoring being a necessary chore to be completed for the benefit of others, monitoring can become integral to the whole operation and direction of the project.

In looking at less traditional ways of monitoring and evaluating work we may need to remember that there are other agencies with expectations about how a project will measure its work. Often it is possible to work in a new way whilst still satisfying these requirements. For instance it may be possible to change qualitative data into numerical measures.

Some new approaches

Just a few possible approaches to monitoring and evaluation are described below, mainly to illustrate that different approaches are possible. There are very many possibilities, and it is important to remember that no one strategy solves all problems, and that different strategies are appropriate for different scenarios.

Evaluation by an expert

It is possible to carry out an evaluation in a traditional way, in that an independent person (or team) is engaged to investigate a project. However, unless the evaluation is specifically to be limited to investigating the internal workings of the project it should consider some bigger questions - and in its conclusions the assumptions and values that lay behind judgements must be clear.

It will also be necessary for the independent person (or people) to be creative in how they gather evidence, and to consider carefully whether less obvious conclusions can be drawn.

This kind of an evaluation will work best if it fully involves the project at all stages. The effects should be constructive - building the project's ability to think about the future.

Quality committee

Instead of traditional monitoring approaches, some projects might find it useful to set up a quality monitoring committee. This could be a group of independent members of the public meeting two or three times each year.

This kind of group would work best if the lack of expertise of the members were seen to be an asset - where it is clear that we want them to make judgements on this basis (much like a jury).

It might also be desirable to provide a group with a note of any standards or principles against which work should be judged.

A group could collect evidence for its judgements in many different ways.

Externally facilitated internal evaluation

It may be possible for a project to have an externally facilitated internal evaluation - i.e. an evaluation that is carried out by project staff (and perhaps also other stakeholders), but with the process being facilitated by an independent person. This might work through the following stages:

- The facilitator helps the group to agree the vision that they have for the future.
- The facilitator helps the group to create a scale against which to measure their work – with indicators of success or failure against this scale being defined (based on the vision).
- The facilitator helps the group to look for which indicators are present – and to discourage them from 'bending' evidence to give any particular result.
- The facilitator assists the group to make conclusions based on their observations – and provides support to the group as they plan changes.

Evaluations using volunteers from other projects

Another very powerful option for carrying out an evaluation is to bring together a team of people from other projects that are engaged in fairly similar work.

Such a team may not challenge some of the fundamental values that lay behind a project's work (where they share these values) – but instead they bring a particular level of expertise and insight.

There are some unexpected benefits to working in this way. In particular, the experience may lead to strong relationships between the different organisations, and it may be a huge learning opportunity for team members.

Other possibilities

There are some other possible ways to strengthen the value of monitoring and evaluation, within whatever structures are being used. For instance:

- It might look for evidence both for and against particular conclusions – for instance for evidence both that a project is 'doing good' and also for evidence that they are 'doing harm'.
- It might approach competing organisations for their opinions.
- It might involve a longer debate about initial conclusions, during which evidence can be submitted for and against these conclusions.

More...

To discuss possible work around monitoring and evaluation please contact me using the details on the front of this document.

I am very happy to provide some support informally (i.e. without any charge) by telephone or email, and I am often happy to have a longer conversation in person before work is commissioned. A third option can be to begin a process with a longer formal consultancy session.