

# Ten Years of Neutral Assessments: What Have We Learned?

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# Overview of Presentation

- Background and Context of Study
- Analytical Framework
- Methodology
- Key Findings
- Discussion and Questions

# Background

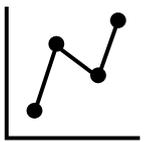
- Neutral assessments have been conducted in federal government departments and agencies since 2009
- Purpose is to inform senior executives regarding conformity to TB policy and to provide areas for improvement
- General guidance provided by Treasury Board Secretariat

# Study Objective

Examine the neutral assessment reports conducted on behalf of Canadian federal evaluation functions, to:



Determine how neutral assessments have been designed and conducted thus far



Identify key trends in evaluation operations, practices and use in federal government organizations

# Analytical Framework

## Neutral Assessment Approaches

Timeframe and duration

Methods and data sources

Reporting approach

## Key Findings

Compliance with Policy

Organizational  
Capacity to Do and Use  
Evaluation

Actual Use of Evaluation

Recommendations

Progress over time

# Methodology

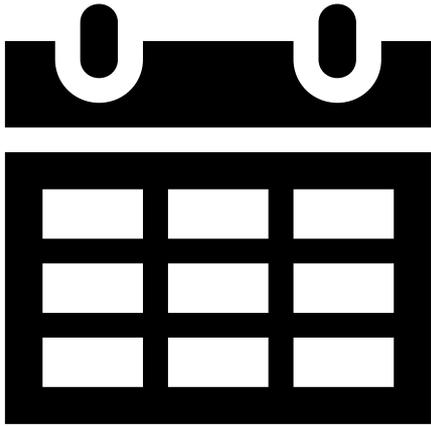


Qualitative content analysis of 41 reports from 28 different organizations

Creswell (2014) data analysis approach conducted with QDA Miner

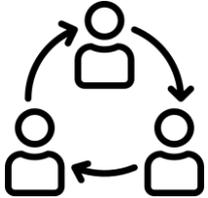
- 1 Organization and preparation of the data
- 2 Reading the data
- 3 Coding and data reduction
- 4 Thematic and descriptive analysis
- 5 Interpretation and revision of analytical framework

# Approach: Timeframe and duration

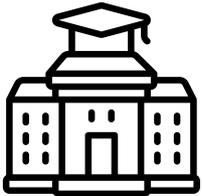


- Assessment period: 3 to 6 years of activity
- Duration of neutral assessment: 3 to 4 months

# Approach: Neutral assessors



2 internal teams with external peer reviewer from another department or agency



1 university team



12 external auditors (4 of 12 led by same)  
21 external evaluators (6 of 21 led by same)

# Approach: Methods and data sources

## Methods

**Almost all:** Document review and key informant interviews

**Many:** client surveys, focus groups with evaluation staff, secondary analysis of client and admin data; case studies on evaluation projects

**Others:** informal consultations and interdepartmental comparisons

## Data Sources

**Documents:** evaluation reports, working papers, MRAP, minutes from DEC or PMED, corporate reports, internal guides and procedures

**People:** Senior executives, DEC or PMEC, evaluation clients, Head of Evaluation, evaluation managers and staff, TB analysts, some external stakeholders

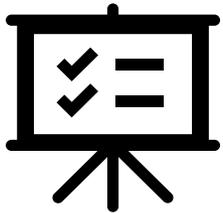
# Approach: Assessment Questions

- Conformity to TB expectations
- Governance and management of the evaluation function
- Quality and timeliness of evaluation products
- Capacity to conduct and use evaluations
- Actual uses of evaluations
- Coordination and alignment of PM and evaluation functions
- Credibility and neutrality
- Added value to the organization

# Approach: Reporting

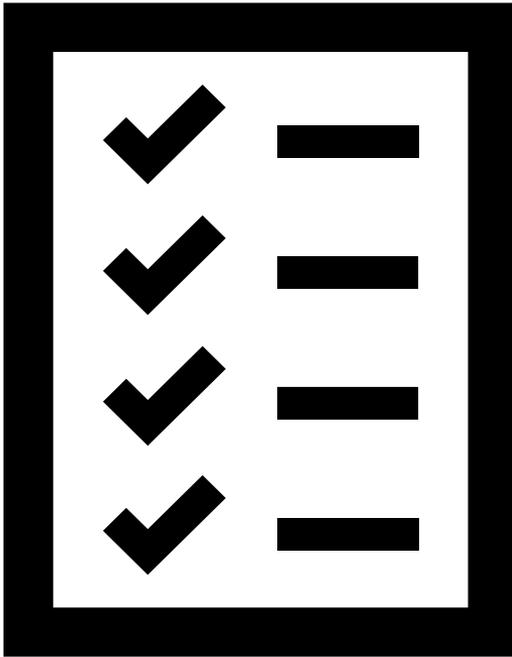


Most reports were submitted as MS Word (19) or PDF documents (17)



Five remaining were submitted as presentation files (slide docs)

# Findings: Compliance



- 38 out of 41 reports address this issue
- Quite positive overall: most use the « general conformance » term
- Many reports remain somewhat vague in their declaration of compliance
- Many reports also provide information on progress towards compliance and highlight needed improvements

# Findings: Capacity of evaluation team



**Staffing:** Important variability between organizations in terms of turnover and balanced teams



**Technical Skills:** Overall positive in terms of quality and credibility of the work produced by evaluators but mainly based on perception of senior executives



**Communication Skills:** Quite complementary in reference to professionalism and ethical behaviour



**Professional Development:** Not generally addressed; some recognition of the importance of continuous learning



**Leadership:** Overall positive in terms of management skills of HoE and creating a culture of evaluation; direct link to conformity to the Policy

# Findings: Organizational resources needed for evaluation



**Budget:** Evaluation functions have been adequately resourced over the years – mainly anecdotal information obtained through interviews



**Integration of performance measurement:** Continuing challenges associated with quality and availability of performance measurement to support evaluation



**Infrastructure:** Sufficient capacity in terms of tools, procedures, and overall governance mechanisms that support evaluation in the organization

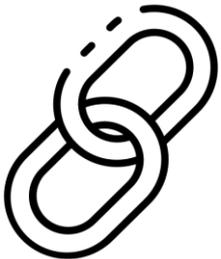
# Findings: Planning and conducting evaluations



**Evaluation Plan:** Planning exercises are conducted effectively for the most part



**Use of Consultants:** Appropriate balance between internal and external resources to conduct evaluations



**Organizational Linkages and External Supports:** Very few reports mention this aspect other than the link between evaluation and audit

# Findings: Capacity to use evaluations across the organization

- Almost all reports state that evaluations are used by program managers and senior executives to make decisions about program design and resource allocation
- Effective reporting and communication structures to ensure that evaluations make their way to those who can use them
- However, many reports also state the evaluations do not address issues of interest to senior executives and do not contribute to decision-making

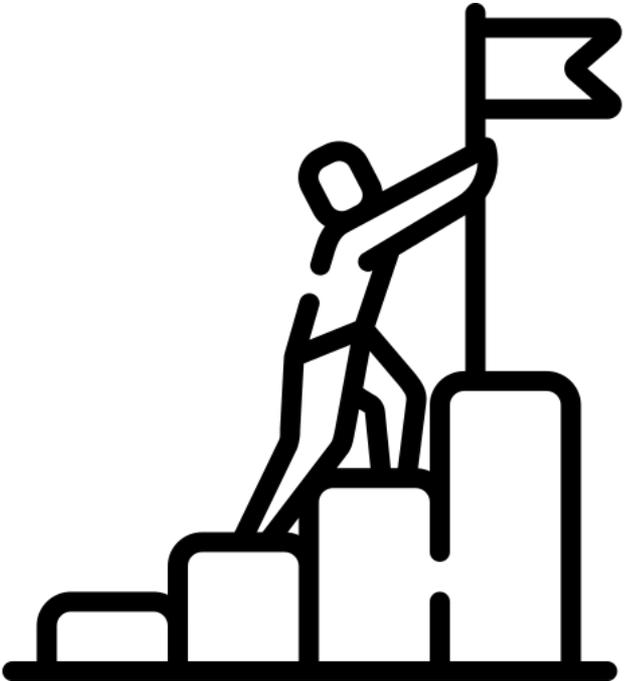


- Conflation of two notions: capacity to use vs. actual use
- Reliance on interview/anecdotal data

# Findings: Actual Uses of Evaluation

- **Instrumental use:** Evaluation findings and recommendations result in positive changes to programs or initiatives and confirm existing knowledge
- **Strategic use:** Limited contributions of evaluation to broader decision-making within the organization; evaluations are not generally focused on strategic issues and challenges faced by programs and organizations

## Findings: Progress over time



- 13 organizations submitted more than one report
- Only 5 reports mentioned that they were the second neutral assessment
- No real follow-up on recommendations from first report

# Findings: Recommendations

- **Planning:** Involving key stakeholders during the development of the five-year evaluation plan and in developing logic models
- **Scoping:** Managing evaluation scope according to risk to focus on strategic evaluation activities and leveraging data collected from other organizational units
- **Stakeholder involvement:** Increasing involvement throughout the evaluation process
- **Methodology:** Describing methods more clearly to link findings and recommendations, using more complex or novel methodological approaches
- **PM Integration:** Providing training to program staff and higher level planning and implementation of PM strategies across the organization

# Findings: Recommendations

- **Professional development:** Adequate staffing and continued professional development of evaluation staff
- **Dissemination:** Improving evaluation knowledge transfer through various mechanisms
- **Monitoring the evaluation function:** Developing measures and tools such as client surveys, to assess satisfaction and to monitor ongoing implementation of recommendations – key also is to collect concrete evidence of evaluation utilization over time
- **Use of consultants:** Increasing internal capacity to reduce dependence on external consultants and develop standardized approaches to increase quality of evaluations

# Key Takeaways

- Neutral assessments mainly followed TB guidance: audit-like approach (rubber-stamping) or thematic assessment (more nuanced view of evaluation practice and use)
- Strong reliance on input from internal stakeholders reflects organization's view of evaluation only
- Conflation of capacity to use vs. actual use: very little data on how evaluation is used and is mainly anecdotal
- Changing conception of evaluation: moving away from program-based, coverage-oriented evaluations, towards strategic evaluations that support decision-making
- Evaluation reporting has also improved over time to better meet informational needs

# Ten Years of Neutral Assessments: What Have We Learned?

- Notable evolution of the evaluation function in recent years, mainly attributable to the Policy on Results
- Increased understanding of the role that evaluation can play in government organizations
- Some questions remain about the added value of the evaluation function and how it can best support decision-making
- Future neutral assessments should consider moving away from a conformity and operations focus, and towards an evidence-based assessment of the contributions of evaluation
- They should continue to be carried out by external, neutral parties, but with a view to improve the measures taken of evaluation utilization and with appropriate external comparisons