

WORKING WITH
CONSULTANTS

Resources for Funders
and Nonprofits

HIRING AN **EXTERNAL EVALUATOR**

ASHLEIGH HALVERSTADT, EVALUATION AND LEARNING OFFICER

 S. D. BECHTEL, JR.
FOUNDATION
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

Done well, evaluation is an authentic learning process that supports nonprofits, foundations, and their partners to make better decisions as they work to solve a range of complex problems. Most nonprofits and foundations engage in some form of evaluation, but few have dedicated evaluation staff.^{1,2} As a result, external evaluators play an important role in the sector. Responsibility for hiring them often falls to executives and program staff.

Finding an evaluator may feel like a daunting task if you don't have a research or evaluation background. This essay seeks to help you put the hard-earned experience of others to use through a set of practical steps, prompts, and tips for matching the right evaluator to your need.

Preparing to work with an evaluator

Know your purpose and audience

Being clear and specific about the purpose and audience for your evaluation is one of the most important things you can do to prepare for a successful engagement. A common concern about evaluation, especially among funders, is that it can be challenging to translate evaluation findings into meaningful insights that inform decisions.^{3,4} Though many factors influence the utility of evaluation, articulating how you expect the findings to be used is the first step toward ensuring that they actually are.

Before you hire an evaluator, ask:

- **Why do we need to conduct an evaluation?**
- **Who is the evaluation for?**
- **What do we need to learn?**
- **How and when will the evaluation findings be used?**

Engage key decision-makers and intended users in helping you answer these questions. If the evaluation is attentive to their needs from day one, it will be much more likely to produce actionable findings.

If you find it challenging to identify a user for the evaluation or to imagine users thinking or acting differently based on the evaluation findings, stop and reflect on whether it is necessary to invest in external evaluation at all. Don't enter into an evaluation just to please another party or because you think it would be interesting. Insist that evaluation be *useful*.

Being clear and specific about the purpose and audience for your evaluation is one of the most important things you can do.

1 Innovation Network (2016). "[State of Evaluation 2016: Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector.](#)"

2 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2017). "[Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter? A National Study of Philanthropic Practice.](#)"

3 The Center for Effective Philanthropy and Center for Evaluation Innovation (2016). "[Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices.](#)"

4 Monitor Institute by Deloitte (2017). "[Reimagining Measurement: A better future for monitoring, evaluation, and learning.](#)"

If you need help clarifying purpose or audience, consider working with an evaluator to develop an evaluation plan. A planning engagement can help you take stock of what information you already have as well as what information you truly need and the role evaluation might play in helping you gather it. In some cases, you may even want the evaluator to conduct a feasibility study (often called an evaluability assessment) to assess whether it is possible to execute a credible evaluation that will serve your intended purpose.

MANAGING MULTIPLE AUDIENCES

Organizations often hope to serve multiple audiences with a single evaluation. This can put evaluators in a challenging position as they try to craft an approach that will meet the needs of all stakeholders. For example, board members often want to understand the impact of a program and may expect a highly rigorous and quantitative approach. Program staff, on the other hand, may be most interested in understanding what's working and what's not, so that they can adjust program implementation – a need that might be best served by a qualitative approach.

Think carefully about your potential audiences. Are their needs non-negotiable or just nice-to-have? Whose needs should be prioritized? The reality is that in some cases, serving multiple audiences will be unavoidable. In those instances, be very clear with potential evaluators about who your audiences are, what information they need, and what type of information they will find credible. If you can articulate this at the outset, you will be able to plan and budget accordingly.

Distinguishing between research and evaluation

The terms “research” and “evaluation” are defined and used in different ways by different people, and some think of them as intertwined or even interchangeable. However, distinguishing between the two may help clarify your thinking about your purpose – and accordingly, what type of evaluator you want to work with. Consider the following distinctions.⁵

RESEARCH	EVALUATION
<i>Purpose is testing theory and producing generalizable findings.</i>	<i>Purpose is to determine the effectiveness of a specific program or model.</i>
<i>Questions originate with scholars in a discipline.</i>	<i>Questions originate with key stakeholders and primary intended users of evaluation findings.</i>
<i>Quality and importance judged by peer review in a discipline.</i>	<i>Quality and importance judged by those who will use the findings to take action and make decisions.</i>
<i>Ultimate test of value is contribution to knowledge.</i>	<i>Ultimate test of value is usefulness to improve effectiveness.</i>

Choosing an evaluation approach that serves your purpose

Evaluators use a variety of terms to refer to the types of evaluation they conduct. Familiarizing yourself with some of the most commonly used terms, defined below, will help you navigate the landscape and develop an evaluation that aligns with your purpose.⁶

Developmental evaluation supports innovation and development. It is used while a program is still being created to provide stakeholders with ongoing, real-time feedback about what is emerging and to support them in determining what to do next. It explores questions about what is being developed and with what implications, what is happening contextually that affects the work, and what the next steps are.

Formative evaluation supports program improvement. It explores questions about the strengths and weaknesses of a program, what works and what doesn't (and for whom in what ways and under what conditions), how participants feel about the program, how program quality and cost effectiveness can be improved, and ultimately, how the program's impact can be enhanced.

Summative evaluation assesses the value and effectiveness of a program. It is used to inform decisions about whether to continue, expand, or replicate a model. It explores questions about outcomes (including unanticipated outcomes) and the extent to which they can be attributed to the program, the validity of the program's theory of change, key factors that support or impede success, contextual factors that affect outcomes, and cost effectiveness.

⁵ This table was directly excerpted from: Patton, Michael Quinn (2017). “[Evaluation Flash Cards: Embedding Evaluative Thinking in Organizational Culture.](#)” Otto Bremer Trust.

⁶ These definitions were adapted with permission from: Patton, Michael Quinn (2017). “[Evaluation Flash Cards: Embedding Evaluative Thinking in Organizational Culture.](#)” Otto Bremer Trust.

Assess your readiness

Before you conduct a formative or summative evaluation, it is important to articulate the intended outcomes of your program, as well as your theory and underlying assumptions about how the program leads to those outcomes (i.e., your theory of change). A strong theory of change is meaningful, plausible, achievable, and testable.⁷ It should directly inform the questions you ask and the data you collect in an evaluation.

If you don't have a strong theory of change in place, budget some time and resources to work on this. This does not necessarily need to take place before you hire an evaluator; it can be part of your work together. A good evaluator will help you develop or refresh your theory of change before designing and implementing an evaluation. If you want an evaluator to help you with this, look for an expert facilitator who will challenge your assumptions about how change happens and help you engage and build alignment among a wide range of stakeholders, including your intended beneficiaries. If you'd prefer to tackle this work on your own, there are toolkits available that will walk you through the process.⁸

A good evaluator will help you develop or refresh your theory of change before designing and implementing an evaluation.

Assess the need to outsource

Does evaluation need to be conducted by a third party to be legitimate? Many people think so. But consider the underlying assumption in this reasoning: a belief that external evaluators are neutral and objective. Though evaluators strive to embody these qualities – and employ a range of social science techniques to reduce bias in their work – they are only human. Like the rest of us, they respond to human incentives (e.g., an interest in delivering good news or softening bad news for a client) and are subject to human biases (e.g., a tendency to interpret data in ways that are consistent with their own lived experience or theoretical perspective).

Valid, reliable, *useful* data comes in many forms and can be gathered in many ways. Depending on what you want to learn, conducting an internal evaluation may be more appropriate, timelier, and less costly than hiring a third party.

Consider hiring an external evaluator only if:

- You don't have the expertise or bandwidth to complete the work effectively in-house;
- Your organization has strongly held beliefs about the work being evaluated, and you need a third party to help challenge or confirm your assumptions; or
- Your target audience will consider the evaluation findings credible only if the work is completed by a third party with distinct expertise, experience, name recognition, or perceived objectivity (e.g., external evaluation is often necessary to influence policymakers).

⁷ Learning for Action (2017). "[Environmental Education Better Results Toolkit](#)."

⁸ For example, [this toolkit](#) from Learning for Action provides a step-by-step guide to creating a theory of change and then using it to develop an evaluation plan and engage in continuous improvement. Though specifically crafted for environmental education programs, a similar process could be employed in any program area.

Choosing the right evaluator

Look for technical expertise, and then look beyond it

At its core, evaluation is applied social science research, and good evaluators have expertise in social science research techniques. Specifically, look for an individual or team with experience in a *diverse* range of evaluation theories, designs, and methods and an ability to deploy different approaches in different contexts.

Don't assume, however, that the best evaluator is the one with the PhD or the longest curriculum vitae. Great evaluators have personal attributes and practical skills that may not be visible on a resume, including:

- **Utilization focused.** If you want your evaluation to be useful, you need an evaluator who is up to the task. Most evaluators can provide a competent *description* of evaluation findings; the ability to *interpret* and *apply* the findings is a higher-order skill. Look for an evaluator with the ability to either: (A) identify the strategic implications of the findings for your work, or (B) facilitate a learning process that will enable you to do so.
- **Project management skills.** Evaluation work plans need to be carefully designed and tightly managed – especially for large-scale projects. Programs don't slow down to accommodate evaluators. Many tasks are dependent on others, and data collection windows can be narrow. If the work becomes rushed or delayed, data integrity may suffer. Make sure someone on the evaluation team is adept at holding the big picture, keeping tasks on track, and adapting when unexpected challenges arise.
- **Translational skills.** A great evaluator can explain technical concepts in words anyone can comprehend, both verbally and in writing. If you find yourself straining to understand an evaluator in their interview or proposal, move to the next candidate.
- **Courage and sensitivity.** Sometimes evaluators need to deliver bad news. Look for a partner who is brave enough to report unpopular findings with integrity and can do it empathetically enough for the information to be heard.
- **Finally, and most importantly, humility and cultural competence.** Every evaluation, regardless of its subject, is shaped by culture. Though often unseen, culture is present in every decision an evaluator makes – from defining the evaluation questions to interpreting the results. An evaluator who does not attend to culture is at risk of producing invalid findings – or worse, exacerbating the very injustices a program seeks to address.

The best evaluators are self-reflective, aware of their own cultural positioning and continually checking their own blind spots and assumptions. They are committed to equitable evaluation principles, including treating the advancement of equity as a core responsibility of their work, examining the role of structural inequities and cultural context, and designing evaluations to involve and reflect the voices of diverse stakeholders, including beneficiaries.⁹

Increasingly, evaluators are being asked to do much more than gather, analyze, and report data.¹⁰ They may be expected, for example, to support strategy development, to facilitate learning processes, or to communicate with stakeholders. Think carefully about the purpose and audience for your evaluation as you consider what you need in an evaluator. In addition to the qualifications above, you may need an evaluator skilled in training, coaching, facilitation, equity, change management, systems thinking, strategic communications, or any number of other competencies. Make sure the team has all the skills that are important to you.

9 This essay only scratches the surface of cultural competence and equitable evaluation – and why these principles are critical to high-quality evaluation. For additional information, see:

- Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, and Luminare Group (2017). "[Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper](#)."
- American Evaluation Association (2018). "[American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles](#)."
- American Evaluation Association (2011). "[American Evaluation Association Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation](#)."

10 Coffman, Julia (2016). "[Oh for the Love of Sticky Notes! The Changing Role of Evaluators Who Work with Foundations](#)."

WORKING WITH UNIVERSITIES

Broadly speaking, you have two choices when hiring an external evaluator: you can work with an evaluation consultant (an individual or a firm), or you can work with a university (a faculty member or a research center).

Both can be excellent partners, well equipped with the attributes and expertise you need. The best fit for any given project will depend on its purpose. Because university teams often employ a high degree of methodological rigor in their work, they tend to be well suited to projects with a strong research component (designed to test a theory or produce generalizable findings) as well as summative evaluation (which often requires rigorous evidence to satisfy an external audience).

If you are considering working with a university, it is helpful to understand how the university environment differs from that of consulting firms. The following suggestions, though good practice in any evaluation partnership, take on special meaning in the university context:

- **Get aligned on purpose and audience.** In addition to serving the needs of their clients, university teams have research agendas of their own. They need to produce publishable findings in order to thrive (e.g., to build credentials, secure research grants, help students complete degree requirements, and help faculty get tenure). As long as the university team shares your organization's learning objectives, this will only strengthen the work. If your goals are not aligned, however, the team may find itself juggling the need to produce publishable results with the need to produce results your organization can use.
- **Look for applied research experience.** Conducting evaluation in a real-world program setting is different from conducting research in a laboratory. Any number of practical challenges can arise that the evaluator cannot control and must adapt to in real time. Some of the work conducted by universities is theoretical or limited to controlled experiments. Make sure your selected partner also has applied experience in a context like yours.
- **Talk openly about constraints, and develop contingency plans.** Course correction can be challenging in a university setting, which comes with certain constraints. For example, university teams do many things beyond contract work (notably, they teach, write, and perform academic services); their work is governed by the academic calendar; operating budgets may be made up of inflexible grant funds; and they must submit their research and evaluation plans (and any subsequent changes to those plans) to an Institutional Review Board for approval. This environment can make it difficult for universities to commit time and resources flexibly to meet client demands. Be sensitive to the pressures your university partner is under, and think proactively together about how you will adapt if things get off track.

Developing the evaluation plan

Right-size the project and your expectations

As you begin to develop an evaluation plan, look to your evaluator for guidance on how to approach it. You may have heard that experimental, quantitative research methods (e.g., randomized controlled trials) are the gold standard of research and that self-reported data and qualitative methods can't be trusted.¹¹ Don't let these misconceptions pressure you into buying more evaluation than you need.¹²

The truth is that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of credible evidence. Different methods are appropriate in different contexts, and every evaluation design comes with trade-offs. For example, randomized controlled trials do not perform well in situations of high complexity (such as systems change efforts); they cannot tell us much about *how* or *why* an intervention worked (only *whether* it did); they do not attend to the importance of context; and they are often impractical due to time and resource constraints, as well as the ethical concerns associated with establishing a control group.¹³

A good evaluator understands the strengths and weaknesses of various designs and will help you select an approach and level of rigor that is appropriate to your purpose.

Keep in mind that even the most rigorous evaluation design may be unable to produce definitive “proof” of cause and effect. Social sector evaluation tends to focus on contribution (the extent to which an intervention *helped* cause an outcome), rather than attribution (the extent to which an intervention *directly* caused an outcome). Understanding this from the outset and managing expectations with stakeholders about what you can realistically hope to measure and learn will help you avoid disappointment down the road.

The truth is that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of credible evidence.

11 Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, and Luminare Group (2017). “[Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper](#).”

12 Qualitative data (e.g., interview data) is frequently dismissed as “anecdotal” when, in fact, the data collection and analysis techniques used to gather it are just as systematic and rigorous as those used in quantitative approaches.

13 For a full discussion of the limitations of experimental design, see: Patton, Michael Quinn. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008.

Plan and budget for knowledge sharing

It is tempting to wait until an evaluation is nearly complete before considering how to package and share the findings. But by then, it may be too late. You may discover that you don't have adequate time or resources to get any needed communications work done or learn that your evaluator does not have the skills to support your knowledge dissemination goals.

It is never too early to think about dissemination. Before you hire an evaluator, ask members of your target audience what information they need, in what form, and how and when they want to use it. This will help you understand what type of product or process will best support them to apply the evaluation findings. Don't assume that your only option is to circulate a lengthy technical report; evaluation findings can be shared in many forms (e.g., policy briefs, infographics, interactive workshops, etc.) and should be tailored to the intended purpose and audience.

If possible, select an evaluator who can deliver the findings in your preferred form. Ask to see sample work products during the interview process so that you can assess the evaluator's communications capabilities. If necessary, think creatively about where to source these skills. If you are working with an individual or small firm, consider bringing in a communications expert to help translate the evaluation findings into knowledge products suitable to your audience. If you are working with a large firm, ask whether the communications department can allocate sufficient time to the project to help create the deliverables.

It is never too early to think about dissemination.

EACH OF US CAN HELP ALL OF US LEARN AT SCALE

Advancing meaningful social change requires that we collaborate and share knowledge across organizations. But most evaluations are focused on the needs of a single client.¹³ As a sector, we are building knowledge all the time yet struggling to learn at scale.¹⁴

The next time you conduct an evaluation, challenge yourself to share the results publicly, even if they're not as rosy as you'd hoped. Publish the findings on your website and in online repositories like [IssueLab](#), and spread the news to peer organizations that may stand to benefit from what you learned.¹⁵

13 Engage R+D and Equal Measure (2017). "From Contractors to Conduits: An Exploratory Dialogue among Funders and Evaluators."

14 Monitor Institute by Deloitte (2017). "Reimagining Measurement: A better future for monitoring, evaluation, and learning."

15 For more on why and how to share knowledge, see: Nolan, Clare (2018). "Open for Good: Knowledge Sharing to Strengthen Grantmaking." Foundation Center. DOI: doi.org/10.15868/socialsector.30194

Building authentic partnership

Expect your evaluator to seek your input

Some staff experience anxiety or self-doubt when hiring and managing an evaluator. As is often the case when working with professionals in a scientific field, we might view evaluators as authoritative experts and readily defer to their judgement rather than trust our instincts when something seems awry.

There's no reason to be intimidated. As the client, you possess a wealth of expertise that should inform the evaluation, including a deep understanding of the subject matter, context, and stakeholders involved. Don't hesitate to speak up with questions or concerns during the hiring process or at any point throughout the project.

Effective evaluation partnerships make use of everyone's knowledge. Your evaluator should be able to explain the work to you in lay terms and should actively seek your input.

Treat your evaluator as a mission-critical partner

Nonprofits and foundations tend to engage external evaluators in very transactional ways. We view them as contractors and don't often think about how individual transactions are shaping the evaluation field.

External evaluators play a crucial role in the social sector ecosystem. We rely on them to help build our collective understanding of how to drive social change most effectively. If we believe that knowledge is one of our greatest assets, then evaluators are among our most important partners.

Keep this in mind the next time you hire an external evaluator. There is growing recognition of the need to diversify the evaluation profession and to cultivate young talent.¹⁶ As consumers of evaluation, we can do our part by seeking out diverse candidates, giving junior evaluation staff a seat at the table, and acknowledging and supporting the full cost of running a high-quality evaluation practice. Funders can go one step further by providing capacity-building support for evaluators just as we do for grantees.

At their best, evaluation engagements are much more than business transactions; they are mission-critical partnerships that elevate the work of the social sector and advance the public good.

Evaluation engagements are mission-critical partnerships that elevate the work of the social sector and advance the public good.

¹⁶ Engage R+D and Equal Measure (2017). "[From Contractors to Conduits: An Exploratory Dialogue among Funders and Evaluators.](#)"

ASHLEIGH HALVERSTADT, EVALUATION AND LEARNING OFFICER

Ashleigh joined the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation in 2014 and serves as the evaluation and learning officer. She works closely with program staff to ensure that the Foundation's evaluation strategies are generating insight about what's working, what's not, and what can be done better in support of the Foundation's goals. Prior to joining the Foundation, Ashleigh was an independent consultant, providing fundraising, program evaluation, and strategic planning support to a portfolio of nonprofit clients. Previously, she served on the development team at New York Road Runners, where she managed public and private grants and spearheaded an initiative to design and implement an outcome management system for the organization's youth programs. She graduated with honors from the University of Washington, earning dual degrees in geography and political science, and holds a Master of Public Administration from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.

WORKING WITH CONSULTANTS SERIES

Consultants support the effectiveness of nonprofit agencies and grantmakers in many ways and on many levels. Aligning the right consultant with an organization's need, budget, and work style can generate significant benefits for all involved. Based on lessons we've learned as well as the experiences of grantees we support, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation offers resources for working with consultants. This series features a guide for helping organizations take steps to find, hire, and manage a consultant. It includes essays on working with consultants who specialize in high-interest topics: strategic planning, communications, evaluation, and fundraising.

See the full series online at sdbjrfoundation.org/effectiveness/consultants



Start by reading this tutorial featuring nine steps to hiring any consultant. It's accompanied by a set of frequently asked questions.



View these essays when engaging consultants to support specialized needs.



Use this guide to develop a Request for Qualifications from consultants.