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Independent Consulting TIG Newsletter

Build Skills and Spirit by Volunteering by Norma Martinez-Rubin, TIG Chair

As independent consultants, to remain relevant and current with in-field developments we commit to ongoing professional development. It feeds our quest for exploration and discovery, idea exchange, and experimentation.

The mere act of registering for a forthcoming workshop or running our fingers through the hard copy of a recently published journal builds anticipation.

An alternative hands-on approach to gaining insights and skills is by volunteering. We discover what little we know and it humbles us. We silently applaud meeting some unforeseen challenge and we smile a little broader. We receive an unsolicited note of thanks and it makes our day. Overall, it just feels good.

We accept challenges to which we tacitly agree for the sake of personal growth. All the while we recognize that in the long-term our contribution, positive or negative, will have influenced someone in some way, and that we better make it worthwhile to all.

We commit to ourselves and we commit to others. In doing so we grow a little more.

In volunteering, professional and personal developments intertwine. The intrinsic benefits often outweigh paid work. So jump in and experiment. The kind appreciation of colleagues is compensation for a sincere sense of commitment.

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CALL FOR NOMINATIONS by Norma Martinez-Rubin, TIG Chair

AEA guidance on TIG governance is that nominations and elections should be fair; those serving in a leadership position should serve no more than 3 years without being re-elected. IC TIG leaders have traditionally encouraged rotations.

We anticipate some continuity in the leadership team for 2012. Deborah Levy will continue as program co-chairperson; MaryLynn Quartaroli as newsletter co-editor; Stephen Maack as TIG webmaster. Others, including myself, will rotate positions to serve in different roles.

At the IC TIG business meeting in Anaheim, CA this fall, TIG members will have the opportunity to vote for: Chairperson-elect, chairperson, and program chairperson. A member may self-nominate or be nominated by an IC TIG member.

The chairperson-elect has a support role amongst the leadership team without the responsibility of chairperson until a year following his/her election. Thus, this “chairperson-in-waiting” has twelve months to plan how best to serve the IC TIG before being in a more active chairperson status.

The chairperson maintains communication with members between annual meetings, initiates or sustains IC TIG services and/or initiatives, and represents the IC TIG among the AEA leadership, its members, and external parties.

The program chairperson(s) coordinate review of AEA conference proposals for sponsorship by the IC TIG. The lead program chairperson is a key AEA contact and prepares a workbook, with input by program co-chairperson(s), which includes a tentative IC TIG program finalized by AEA staff.

Please send your name and a 50-word statement to Norma@EvaluationFocused.com no later than October 31, 2011. State why you want to be the IC TIG chairperson-elect, chairperson, or program co-chairperson. We’ll include that information on a ballot for members who attend the business meeting on November 3rd to cast their vote for 2012 IC TIG leaders.

Meet an IC TIG Member

Each quarter we will feature an IC TIG member in this newsletter. Send your suggestions for future interviewees to Susan Wolfe susan.wolfe@susanwolfeandassociates.net

Marcela Gutierrez

"Being an independent evaluation consultant has its ups and downs, but I would have a hard time going back to working for a firm after having had the flexibility of working at my own pace, picking my own work, and not having to attend endless management meetings."

Marcela Gutierrez

Gutierrez Consulting Partnerships

1. Please describe your independent consulting practice (e.g., are you a sole proprietor, is this 100% what you do or on the side from another job, what is the primary and secondary focus, do you collaborate or subcontract, etc.)

I have been an independent consultant since 2008 and this is my full time job and primary source of income. I work alone for smaller projects, and partner with other consultants in larger projects or when I need a specific type of expertise, such as GIS or SNA. I am a generalist so my work does not have a specific focus. I have done a lot of work on evaluation of human services programs, education (college access and success), community-based initiatives, health (children's mental health and childhood obesity), youth development and mentoring. I also conduct training and capacity building around evaluation for non-profits.

2. What is your disciplinary background?

I am an anthropologist through and through: BA in Anthropology, MA in Medical Anthropology, and Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology.

3. How long have you been evaluating, and how long have you been an independent consultant?

I started in the evaluation field in the early 90s and worked full time in this field since then for various employers (county social service agency, university, and non-profit consulting firm).

4. Are you primarily qualitative, primarily quantitative, mixed methods? Which do you prefer?

I am primarily a qualitative researcher. I am knowledgeable enough about quantitative methods to know when I need help going beyond descriptive statistics.

5. What was your favorite evaluation experience?

My first and most memorable experience as an evaluator was when I was part of an ethnographic evaluation of the national Migrant Education Program as a young graduate student. I was assigned to study migrant workers' attitudes about education and assess their needs in order to inform the national program. I lived in a home base migrant community in Florida for 3 months in the winter, and I traveled up to New York state for the summer following the east coast migration route with families. It was a purely ethnographic methodology at a time when my portable computer was the size of a portable sewing machine! I lived in migrant camps and worked in the fields picking tomatoes and peaches while I observed the operations of the program and typed extensive field notes every night. The project was awarded the Ethnographic Evaluation Award by the Council on Anthropology and Education.

6. What type of experience have you had that was less than ideal?

I was hired to do a "documentation" of a group's work on advancing early childhood education policy at the state level. A local foundation was funding the work and approved the scope of work. However, after the first report, the group said they wanted more than a description of their work, they were looking for an evaluation of their work. The budget was barely enough for the work I was doing as it was, and there was no more money. So, we decided it was not feasible to meet their expectations and we ended the contract.

7. Have you had any comical experiences? Describe them.

One of the male co-directors of the consulting firm I worked for had the same last name as mine. One time we were doing a site visit together and staying at a hotel. His wife called the hotel asking for Dr. Gutierrez and they put her through to my room. She was not expecting to hear a female's voice and said she wanted to be connected to Dr. Gutierrez's room to which I answered, "This is Dr.

Pricing Your Services—con't

By Gail Vallance Barrington (for more information, look for her new book: *Consulting Start-Up & Management*, due out in October from Sage)

Continued from July 2011 newsletter...click here [TIG Resources] if you missed it!

Contingency fee. Contingency fees have been the topic of much ongoing debate in management consulting circles because the consultant is only paid if specific results are achieved. The size of the fee is dependent on the success level of the result. While motivation to succeed is obviously high for the consultant, the risks are significant and you can imagine the impact this approach could have on research ethics!

A contingency arrangement exists when the client asks you to write a funding proposal for free and then "guarantees" you the research or evaluation component of the project if they get the funding. Many colleagues work this way and they are probably very good proposal writers. Still, they are taking a risk because there is no guarantee that they will be hired even if the client does win the grant.

One of my colleagues uses a brief agreement that states if the client obtains the grant, she will be hired for the research component but I am not sure how enforceable this arrangement is. I ask for a very small contract to write the grant (say the equivalent of two days' work) and then I let fate run its course. At least I know I will be paid for my time.

Standing offer. Government departments and agencies sometimes hire consultants through standing offer arrangements. To get on the short list, you submit an extensive description of your skills, research methods, former projects, team members and rates. If you are selected, you sign a standing offer agreement to provide work at the set rates for several years. A cost of living adjustment may also be included. When the agency needs consulting services, they circulate a quick invitation to bid (often to only two or three consultants) and you submit a brief proposal on methodology and price. If you have the time, energy, and resources to survive the initial selection process, you can benefit from being a member of this very select in-group.

Retainer. Historically, retainers were a popular arrangement between organizations and their consultants; they are less common today. The consultant's monthly fee is calculated on a typical number of days at an agreed-upon daily rate. The retainer is paid even if less time is actually used. This results in steady income and security for the consultant and ready access to expertise for the client.

Evaluators often go into small agencies or government departments on a retainer basis to provide technical assistance, update databases, provide short-term management, or develop policy. Criticisms of the method include the lack of a defined scope of work and indeterminate deliverables. You have to be careful that you are not seen as an employee, either by internal staff or by the tax department. Relationships have to be managed carefully so that the client does not start to feel resentful about your monthly bill.

Other pricing methods. There are a variety of other pricing methods that are tied to market issues. The first is to find out how much your competitors charge and then simply set your fees accordingly. This is easier said than done because for many consultants their rates are a closely -guarded secret. One way to find out what they charge is to work with them on a joint project.

However, you have to be careful when selecting your benchmarks. Don't use consultants in larger firms or who have more years of experience. Once you know your competitors' rates, you can price yourself below the competition but you will have to be careful to manage the services you provide as they may be difficult to sustain at a lower than market rate. On the other hand, if you price yourself above the competition, you are asking for a premium and you will need to justify it accordingly. Clients may be willing to pay more for your speed, knowledge, quality of service, or proprietary product or technology, but be sure that your rate is perceived to be fair value.

Another approach is to charge different fees for different segments of your market. You can charge lower fees to non-profits and small or start-up organizations and higher fees to foundations or government departments. Some consultants feel that it is fair to have the big fish help the little fish in this way.

Another choice is to do pro bono work— you offer your services for free to organizations you support. It is a good idea to get a tax receipt for the amount of your contribution if you can. Finally, a very few consultants become celebrities and can charge whatever the market will bear. Sadly, for most of us, this dream is still a few years away. Think carefully about which approach works best for you and your client. Being smart about pricing will help keep you in the consulting game for years to come.

Gutierrez Interview—continued

Gutierrez's room!" Well, it took my colleague some explaining to convince his wife he did not have a female visitor in his room. We laughed about it for a long time.

8. What do you like to do when you're not evaluating?

I do a lot of volunteer work and have looked for ways to offer my professional skills on a volunteer basis. I have been interested in social impact assessment and micro finance and had been reading a lot about it trying to find consulting work. Instead, I got involved with Bankers without Borders, a volunteer recruitment arm of the Grameen Foundation USA. I recently returned from India where I helped a micro finance organization develop a survey to measure social impact among their clients. I am also on the board of a non -profit organization that works with new immigrants around employment needs, and I co-chair a committee for another organization focusing on language access issues around health. I recently helped them develop a test protocol to assess the language capacity of local health clinics and hospitals. It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see the results of my work and seeing I can help make a difference without writing any reports!

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The Independent Consulting (IC) Topical Interest Group members are sole proprietors, or have formed limited liability companies, partnerships, or corporations who work alone, with small staffs, or "as needed" sub-contractors. Our backgrounds are as varied as most of AEA. What we share in common is collegial and friendly support of one another as independent evaluators. Please review the complete mission statement on the website and send your comments and suggestions to the TIG chair.

IC TIG Mission Statement In Brief (Draft)

- *Foster a community of independent evaluators by reducing the isolation of being an independent proprietor*
- *Promote independent consulting as an evaluation profession*
- *Increase the professionalism of independent consultants*

Independent Consulting TIG website

IC TIG Conference Program Update

The Independent Consulting TIG has lined up an exciting program during the AEA Evaluation 2011: Values and Valuing in Evaluation conference, November 2—5, in Anaheim, CA.

We have panel sessions, multi-paper sessions, skill building workshops and demonstrations lined up. There are a wide variety of topics covered by the presenters this year, including the following:

- Quality design and data collection through peer review
- Handling ethical dilemmas
- Challenges and solutions for long distance evaluations
- Growing your business
- Three T's for effective internet presence
- Self-help skill-building fair for intermediate level consultants
- And many, many more

Be sure to attend the popular *Starting and Succeeding as an Independent Consultant* panel on Saturday, November 5, at 9:50 AM.

More information about each session can be found on the AEA website in the conference program.

Most importantly, we hope to see you at the Independent Consulting TIG's annual **business meeting on Thursday, November 3rd from 6:10 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.** in the Manhattan Room.

The meeting will be led by the IC TIG Chair, Norma Martinez-Rubin. Light refreshments will be served.

We will leave for the IC TIG dinner shortly after the meeting. There will be several wonderful activities for members to become more involved in our TIG, so please plan to attend!

"Passion is my life. In fact, what is life without it? A grey wheel of habits spinning oddly on."
Nanny McPhee

"Smile, it enhances your face value."
Truvy (Dolly Parton)
Steel Magnolias