Volume 4, Issue 3 June 2013

Summary 2013

Independent Consulting TIG Newsletter

Expertise

by Randi Nelson 2013 TIG Chair

Do you need content and evaluation expertise to be a good and successful independent evaluator? Or, is evaluation expertise enough? I hope that evaluation expertise outweighs content expertise among prospective clients since my background is, shall we say, eclectic. I have been a Peace Corps volunteer, an agricultural researcher in the private and public sectors, a high school teacher, a university lecturer, and I know a bit of French and Spanish. In other words, I would be hard-pressed to identify one area of expertise. Now as an independent evaluation consultant, I struggle with how to communicate the strengths of this diversity while remaining realistic about the kinds of evaluations I can and should pursue.

My view is that subject matter expertise is not a prerequisite for high quality evaluation *if* my client is willing to work closely with me to provide the content expertise. The *Evaluator Credibility* utility standard of the Program Evaluation Standards[1] addresses this issue by stating "evaluations should be conducted by qualified people who establish and maintain credibility in the evaluation context" (p. 15). Although this short statement does not explicitly define "qualified" or "credibility", its authors appear to distinguish evaluation expertise from content expertise. They suggest the evaluator invite "stakeholders to participate in the role of program experts" (p. 16) as a way of maintaining credibility. I am comfortable with this approach since it reflects my values of collaboration and transparency. I almost always work with a client and other key stakeholders as advisors and co-investigators. However, I also recognize that other evaluators and clients do not use or value this approach. Some clients may not be able or willing to participate actively and others may feel this approach introduces bias into the study.

There are likely to be many more evaluators out there with similarly diverse backgrounds, considering the great number of "accidental" evaluators I meet. How do you handle this issue of evaluation and content expertise? How do you leverage and communicate your diverse experience and training to be an asset rather than a liability? How do you draw realistic boundaries around the kind of work you are competent to do? Please share your thoughts and stories about this with the IC TIG through the listserv and Facebook or email me at eval.partners.nelson@gmail.com.

Best wishes,
Randi Nelson

Inside:

Next newsletter deadline:

August 31, 2013

Please send questions, submissions, or suggestions to Loretta Kelley at LKelley@kpacm.org

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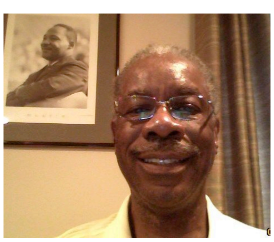
Meet an IC TIG Member

Each quarter we will feature an IC TIG member in this newsletter. Send your suggestions for future interviewees to Loretta Kelley LKelley@kpacm.org

Jerald Henderson, Ph.D.

"I always believed I was primarily a quantitative person... In my years as the Director of Assessment, however, I had to learn to balance my approach... I now appreciate the mixed methods approach."



1. Please describe your independent consulting practice.

In my consulting activities, I am the sole proprietor. My primary focus has been assisting educational entities with implementing effective assessment practices to support program and service improvements that positively affect student achievement, resulting in increased student retention and graduation rates. In this specialization, I have worked primarily with higher education institutions and organizations that work with students in postsecondary settings.

2. What is your disciplinary background?

My background is eclectic in that I have a Ph.D. in Curriculum, Instruction, & Evaluation, a Master's Degree in Counseling, and a Bachelor's Degree in English.

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

I have been in an 'evaluative' role for the last twelve years. I was the Director of Assessment and Program Quality for a university for ten years and worked with both academic and non-academic departments and units helping them develop student learning outcomes. I also helped them look at their program or service effectiveness. I put the word evaluative in quotes because I don't use the term *evaluation* as much as I use the word *assessment*. I believe that conceptually and pragmatically my role has been to assist units and departments with using assessment/evaluation data for the purpose of improvement.

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

I always believed that I was primarily a quantitative person given my educational exposure from my distinguished quantitative professors/mentors (i.e., John Smart, Ernest Pascarella, and Bunty Ethington). I appreciated the power of statistical analysis in ANOVAs, Multiple Regressions, and Structural Equations. In my years as the Director of Assessment, however, I had to learn to balance my approach by utilizing data derived through surveys and other qualitative methods. This was good experience for me, since I took only one qualitative course in graduate school. I now appreciate the mixed methods approach, where applicable.

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

I consulted for a higher education institution and only had a very short period of time (two days) to conduct workshops and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses regarding the assessment processes they had in place. It was frustrating because I felt that I could have done much more for what I was being paid had I been given more time.

6. What was your favorite evaluation experience?

I can't really say that there has been one favorite evaluation experience. In my role as a Consultant Evaluator for the Higher Learning Commission, I have had the privilege of visiting colleges and universities to examine their activities to maintain accreditation. All of those experiences have been very positive and rewarding because I came away with insight about different ways of assessing and evaluating, as well as being able to provide suggestions that were appreciated by the people whom I met.

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

I enjoy spending time with my family and friends. I love reading current educational research and watching science fiction and fantasy-oriented movies and TV shows.

8. Is there anything else you would like for your peers to know about you?

I am glad to know that those who are classified as 'baby boomers' who are able and want to continue to contribute to the academy are given the same opportunities as everyone else. I love my role as an independent consultant because I feel I have more flexibility with my time and I still have a unique perspective that assists those who are working with students who are facing many challenges on their educational and career paths.

Questions to Ask Yourself Before Responding to an RFP

Susan M. Wolfe
Susan Wolfe and Associates, LLC

Responding to Requests for Proposals (RFPs) is time consuming, sometimes expensive, and usually unpaid. Knowing when to respond can save time and money. Here are some tips for deciding which proposals to respond to which I shared at the AEA 2012 convention at the Intermediate Consulting Skills Self-Help Fair.

Is this a real RFP, or does it seem to be written so that only a specific organization would qualify?
Not all RFPs are open competitions. Some are posted to meet a requirement, but the sponsoring organization already knows who it wants. Understanding how RFPs are written is important. Learn to read between the lines. Ask questions if you know people associated with the RFP, but they may not tell you that it is not a "real" RFP.

Is This Within My Expertise?
Make an honest assessment of your skills, abilities, and experience compared with the demands of this job. If you need to stretch yourself to qualify, it is not worth your time. If you would like to break into a new area, consider contacting a more qualified colleague and suggest collaborating on this proposal.

Do I Have Time to Write a GOOD Proposal?
Determine the demands of writing and submitting the proposal. Prepare an outline and a detailed task list. If you do not have time to write a good, well-organized, and comprehensive proposal, pass. Submitting a haphazard proposal could limit your chances of future work with the organization.

Is the Maximum Funding Enough to do a Good Job?
Know the amount of time and effort it will take to do each of the project tasks. If there is not enough money to do the job well, consider passing. Otherwise, you risk not doing the project justice, or not being compensated for the extra time required to do the project well. Remember that *your* name will go on the final report.

Will the demands of this job fit my current workload?
Before considering taking on more work, estimate your workload for this project from start to end, including any necessary travel time. If this project overlaps with another project and you can do justice to both, submit your proposal. Otherwise, pass it up. Your reputation is at stake and it's your most valuable asset.

Next month's newsletter will contain more tips for responding to RFPs. Stay tuned.

My First Employee

By Jan Upton
Institutional Research Consultants, Ltd.

After 10 years of mulling it over, I hired my first employee. Moving from "single owner" to "employer" was a difficult decision. My fears were:

1. Having sufficient cash flow. I've paid subcontractors since 2003, so this was a non-issue.
2. The additional paperwork, taxes, and other expenses. (The additional cost was 14% of the employee's total pay.)
3. Where would this person work? I worked from my home and there wasn't room.
4. I was so overwhelmed with work that the idea of hiring someone was unfathomable.

Then, Danyell Lewis came into my life. She had emailed me six months prior with a "new to evaluating in Ohio" request; I responded with my standard advice to join AEA and the Ohio Program Evaluators' Group. Her follow-up email came at a difficult time in my life. I was dealing with stress-related health issues and was behind on most projects. Danyell asked to talk; I responded that I was "insanely busy". She was sympathetic and we got acquainted via email. She reminded me a lot of myself in my early 20s. After interviewing her and her references, I hired her. I did not first decide to hire, advertise the position, or interview candidates. Rather, mentoring is an important component of our relationship.

<u>Preparation for New Employee</u>
Getting ready for Danyell required over 80 hours of my time. Below are things I did.

1. Spoke with CPA for referrals to payroll services. I run the payroll monthly. The service handles the required compliance paperwork, but I spent three evenings completing forms.
2. Developed agreement and documentation forms covering job responsibilities, weekly schedule, hours by project, and purchases.
3. Bought equipment compatible with mine so that she could complete assigned tasks from her home.
4. Since we do telephone interviews, IRC pays for Danyell's phone service.

<u>Greatest Challenge</u>
Getting ahead so that I don't scramble to prepare assignments. I now can delegate tasks without detailed instructions or demonstrations.

<u>Lessons Learned</u>

1. Daily Task List – I send priorities to Danyell most evenings. She acknowledges them upon starting work.
2. Bi-weekly Phone/Skype Meeting – Although I'm accustomed to working with minimal in-person contact, this is a new experience for Danyell. She requested a formal meeting every two weeks.

<u>Greatest Benefits</u>

1. No more backlog of late reports.

2. We're doing things that have been on the backburner for years (e.g., updated website www.irc-evaluation.com).

3. Danyell is young, enthusiastic, and fun to work with. Her excitement about growing the company is contagious.

FAQs and What to Do About Them!

by Gail V. Barrington

Question: How can I avoid scope creep?

Answer: Scope creep is a big problem due to volatile project environments, budget cutbacks, and staffing changes. We need good project management skills or the scope will expand unattended, affecting our bottom line. Some examples I have experienced include:

- A limited initial view of project requirements;
- Lack of control over timelines and scheduling;
- Staff turnover.

Strategies:

1. Use a phased project approach

When writing your proposal, you have the least knowledge you will ever have about the project, yet your eventual success is at stake. A phased approach to project design can manage overall project scope. For example:

- Phase 1—Evaluability assessment and project work plan;
- Phase 2—Evaluation conduct;
- Phase 3—Knowledge translation support.

This approach allows you to interview stakeholders, read relevant documents, and design the project, all as legitimate project activities. Clients can phase their budget over multiple budget years. Several contract end points allow both parties to bow out gracefully if the relationship fails, while still producing deliverables.

2. Provide status reports

A one-page monthly status report is an important scope management tool. Provide a table to link current task completion to the work plan. Add a summary paragraph to describe interesting events or spotlight emerging issues.

Because status reports link to milestone billing, I know as month-end approaches if I have not yet completed requirements. It's a good way to stay focused and within scope. Follow up with a phone call to discuss task status or strategize about issues.

3. Acculturate new staff

A tough scope management issue is staff turnover. Review your project with the new contract manager to determine if changes are required and provide training. Initially, managers may be overwhelmed and compliant, but once established, they may have other ideas for the evaluation. Communication and reporting are not enough. Try to draw the manager more closely into the research team. Attend meetings with them to provide back-up. Invite them on data collection activities. Take them to lunch and try to manage the chemistry. The acculturation process will pay off if your project can continue as planned.

Gail V. Barrington

For more information on consulting topics see Barrington, G. V. (2012). *Consulting Start-up & Management: A Guide for Evaluators & Applied Researchers.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

I invite ideas for topics that interest our members. Send any suggestions for future columns to me at gbarrington@barringtonresearchgrp.com.

Managing evaluation projects from a distance

by Elizabeth Radel Freeman and Stacy Johnson, The Improve Group

Exciting evaluation projects are not always located in your backyard. Managing evaluation projects from hundreds (or thousands!) of miles away can be rewarding, yet challenging, for evaluation consultants and their clients. At the Improve Group, we have the opportunity to work with clients across the nation and worldwide. We have learned many lessons along the way.

We use several strategies to build strong relationships with our distance clients that set our projects up for success. First, whenever a budget allows for **in-person meetings**, we try to schedule at least one in the first few weeks of a project. This helps us get key stakeholders on board, build relationships, and also gives us time to flesh out the "nitty gritty" details of the project with key liaisons. In a typical two-day visit, we hold a kick-off meeting with key stakeholders early on the first day. The rest of the visit is spent refining evaluation questions, protocols, and data collection strategies. It's important to set clear expectations on time commitments before the visit to make this strategy most effective.

We also hold **weekly check-in meetings** with our distance clients. Spending just 30 minutes to an hour checking in each week helps ensure that the evaluation stays on track. As a bonus, these meetings are an extremely effective use of time. When non-urgent questions or concerns about the project come up throughout the week, we are able to defer them until the weekly meeting and save a lot of back and forth email correspondence.

We also keep in touch with our clients through **newsletters and other informal methods**. When we aren't able to meet clients in person, we refer them to our website for pictures and bios of all team members. This helps them connect with us on a personal level.

Our **data collection strategies vary** based on the needs of the project. Phone interviews are efficient for us and the interviewee, and we frequently use this method in our practice. Sending interview protocols in advance often makes the process even smoother. We've found that web-based focus groups work best with tech savvy groups, such as students or young professionals. No matter which strategies we use, we send lots of reminders.

With a little upfront investment in time and careful planning, evaluation projects managed from a distance can bring the same rewards as those located outside your back door.