A healthy workplace is good for business

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO EVALUATION

What is evaluation?

Evaluation is 'the systematic gathering, analysis and reporting of data about a program to assist in decision making'.[1]

Evaluating your program will enable you to work out what was good about it, and what wasn't so good. In other words, evaluating your program is the best way to determine if it has worked and how well it has worked.

Knowing exactly where and how your program has worked (and where it hasn't) will help you make refinements and adjustments that better suit your needs and the needs of your employees. This will make your program as effective as it can possibly be.

Program evaluation may seem a daunting task if you have not attempted this process before.

It doesn't have to be!

We evaluate every day. We commonly ask ourselves questions such as 'Was that how it was supposed to happen?', or 'What difference did that make?'

A formal evaluation process is just taking questions like these and forming them into a simple, cohesive plan. The earlier that you consider program evaluation, the easier it will be.

Why should I evaluate my program?

You might decide to conduct a program evaluation for a number of reasons:

- to discover the effectiveness or impact of your program or initiative (i.e. Was it useful? Did it make a difference?)
- to be accountable to management or other stakeholders, such as funding bodies, clients or employees (i.e. Did we get value for money?)
- to determine ways you can improve your program (i.e. What could we have done better?)
- to compare one program or initiative to other programs or initiatives (i.e. What is more important? Which focus area is the best place to invest?).

When should I start thinking about evaluation?

Evaluation should be considered at the beginning of the implementation process. A major aspect of evaluation is collecting the right data to help you answer the right questions. If you decide at the beginning what questions to ask, you will be better placed to collect the right data from the start, and to set up systems to collect data throughout implementation.

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The five key evaluation questions

There are five fundamental questions that underpin evaluation. These are:

1. What? (Did we do what we said we would do?)
2. Why? (What did we learn about what worked and what didn't work?)
3. So what? (What difference did it make?)
4. Now what? (What could we do differently?)
5. Then what? (How do we make it even better next time?)

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

1. What? (Did we do what we said we would do?)

To answer this question, you will need to describe your activities, and compare your goals and objectives with what actually happened. You'll need to look at the activities that were undertaken, and decide if those activities really contributed to meeting the goals and objectives you originally made. For example, you might have set a goal to reduce the sitting time of your desk-based employees by 10%. What did you do to achieve this? Did that happen as you expected? What were the major achievements? What were the major barriers? What resources were needed?

2. Why? (What did we learn about what worked and what didn't work?)

To answer this question, you will need to determine the reasons for your success (or otherwise!). What strategies worked well? What strategies didn't work so well? Were the people in the target group involved? Were they missed? This is a good time to examine some of the initiatives that didn't work so well, and determine what might be the underlying issues.

For example, by asking the 'What?' question above, you were able to determine that sitting time was reduced in the senior management group, but not in regular office-based employees. Now is the time to delve into that finding and work out why.

3. So what? (What difference did it make?)

Asking this question will help you determine the impact your initiative (or, in fact, your whole program) has had on the target group. What changed as a result? Was it attitude, knowledge, skills or behaviours? Were there any unexpected changes? Were there any factors outside the program that might have contributed to the changes?

For example, you now know that sitting time decreased for senior managers. As a result of this, they found they were more comfortable, had higher energy levels and, in some cases, had a decrease in muscle soreness in their lower back and neck. The initiative had also prompted a few managers to sit less while at home, which may also have contributed to their positive health outcomes.

4. Now what? (What could we do differently?)

Answering this question will help you determine the future of the program or the initiative. What additional knowledge do you need? What are better ways of targeting a particular group? Are there more cost-effective ways of reaching the right audience? Who else could have been involved?

For example, now you have determined that senior managers received real benefits from reducing their sitting time, you could use this finding to better promote this behaviour to the group that did not reduce their sitting time. This alternative strategy may help to engage this group and increase awareness of the benefits of reducing sitting time.

5. Then what? (How do we make it even better next time?)

This question takes step 4 a little further, by determining how the evaluation results will be used on an ongoing basis for future work and importantly, how and to who they will be distributed.

How do I gather the necessary data?

There are many ways you can gather the necessary data for your evaluation. Below is a brief description of the main methods.

- **Surveys**

    Surveys are sets of questions that are asked of a particular group of people. They may be paper-based or online. The key to a survey is that it is asked in the same way to all survey participants. Surveys can be useful in a needs assessment (i.e. finding out what your employees want), but can also be useful to provide baseline data (for example, finding out what percentage of employees smoke, or what percentage of employees participate in regular physical activity). The survey can be repeated after a set time (say 12 months) and the results of the two surveys compared to see how they differ. Surveys take significant time and resources to develop, administer and analyse correctly, so are not suitable in all circumstances.

    Tips for surveys
    - ☐ Pilot your survey to a small group, checking for simplicity of language and ease of use. Be sure that your questions are not worded in ways that lead to biased or misleading responses.
    - ☐ Be clear with what you want to know from a survey – is there a better way to get the information?
    - ☐ Providing an incentive may increase survey response rates. Keep it simple – movie tickets or a grocery voucher are incentives that almost everyone can use.
    - ☐ Limiting the number of questions will increase the response rate.

- **Analysis of data**

    In some circumstances, data will already exist that can 'tell a story', so this may be a very cost-effective method of collection. For example, participation or attendance lists will enable you to determine the number of people that attended an event.

    Tips for analysing data
    - ☐ Analysing existing data has the potential to be time-consuming and tedious. Consider if this is the best way to collect the data you really need.
    - ☐ Take care not to make assumptions about patterns you find while analysing data. For example, if sales of healthier foods in the on-site canteen increased, how much is due to your healthy eating initiatives, and how much is due to external factors, such as other health promotion campaigns?

- **Interviews**

    If you want to know more in-depth information about a particular topic, you could interview some key employees. For example, you could interview an employee who participated in your active transport initiative and found that cycling to work was easier than he thought. In-depth interviews can give personal insight into a topic that can't be gained through analysis of numbers alone.

    Tips for interviews
    - ☐ Interviews are good to get insight, but care must be taken not to bias the answer by asking a leading question. For example, asking 'How did you find cycling to work?' will lead to a more honest response than asking the question 'Do you enjoy cycling to work?'
    - ☐ Give the interviewee a copy of the questions before the interview takes place. This may lead to a more thoughtful and thorough discussion.
    - ☐ Ensure the interviewee has the knowledge to answer the questions asked during the interview.
    - ☐ Consider telephone interviews if face-to-face interviews are time- or cost-prohibitive.

- **Focus groups**

    Focus groups are structured discussions, led by a facilitator in a small group setting. Typically, the facilitator has a set of planned questions on selected topics and records the responses that members of the group express. New or unplanned topics may also be discussed if they are relevant. Focus groups are useful to gain an in-depth understanding of a topic.

    Tips for focus groups
    - ☐ The facilitator must remain neutral and non-judgemental.
    - ☐ Focus groups can be useful to both reflect on work that has been completed and to brainstorm new ideas.
    - ☐ Don't use focus groups as a method for making final decisions.

■ **Observation**

You may choose to observe and record events or you may decide to take part in an event to really get a feel for how it is going. Take care not to generalise the results to a wider group. This method of collecting data is often carried out in addition to another less subjective method.

Surveys and data analysis are known as quantitative data collection. This means that there are numbers to crunch and data to process. Interviews, focus groups and observations are known as qualitative data collection, and relate to more personal or 'human' stories. It is often a good idea to use a mix of these types of data collection to drive home an idea or outcome.

For example, you might find that through an analysis of data, it was seen that sales in the café increased after the introduction of healthier options. Through a staff survey it was noticed that satisfaction levels with the food in the canteen also increased over this period. Your focus groups on healthy eating at work also noted that the food in the canteen was much improved, and that staff were more likely to purchase food there than they were before. Meanwhile, your in-depth interview revealed how a particular employee's attitudes had changed – 'I used to buy a pie from the canteen every day. I was a bit hesitant to try some of that new stuff, but one of the other guys I work with really raved about it so I thought I'd give it a go. I was surprised it was so good – I've tried a few of the others too and they are all really nice. I still get a pie every now and then but I reckon this other stuff has to be better for you.'

What is an evaluation plan?

An evaluation plan is simply a plan summarising how you are going to do your evaluation. It should include:

■ the purpose of the evaluation

■ what data needs to be collected

■ how you might collect this data

■ how you are going to analyse the collected data

■ how the evaluation will be used

■ how the results of the evaluation will be distributed to the intended audience.

Remember, there is no point doing an evaluation if no one is going to use the results.

An evaluation plan can help you to:

■ be clear about what you want to evaluate, when and how

■ identify and approach people in advance who may be important for the collection of this data

■ consult with people about the best way to collect the data

■ determine what time and resources are needed for the evaluation

■ ensure that the scale of the evaluation is appropriate to the scale of the program.

A note on confidentiality

When collecting information, it is important to de-identify all data as much as possible. Names or any other identifying information must not be used in any report or output without the written consent of the individual. Consider any other ethical considerations, such as the likely impact on an individual involved in an in-depth interview, for example.

Hints and tips for evaluation

■ Start small – focus on one initiative and limit the number of evaluation questions. Build your skills as an evaluator over time.

■ Use what you already know about the initiative.

■ Don't forget existing sources of data.

■ Be realistic about your time frame and resources.

■ Include program 'failures' – there is often more to be learnt from what didn't work than from what did.

■ Remember, there is no 'perfect' evaluation.

Further reading

For more information on evaluation, the following websites may be of use.

The Evaluation Toolbox www.evaluationtoolbox.net.au	Although this website has a focus on the evaluation of community sustainability projects, it may be useful as it aims to assist people who have limited experience in evaluation theory and practice.
South Australian Community Health Research Unit, Flinders University http://som.flinders.edu.au/FUSA/SACHRU/PEW/index.htm	This 'Planning and Evaluation Wizard', developed by Flinders University, provides some planning and evaluation tools and examples.
The Australasian Evaluation Society www.aes.asn.au	The professional organisation for individuals involved in evaluation. The website includes publications and other links of interest.
http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods/	This website has a collection of beginner's guides to evaluation covering a wide range of topics.

References

1. Centre for Health Promotion 2007, *Evaluating health promotion programs*, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Available at www.thcu.ca/resource_db/pubs/107465116.pdf.