Maximizing the Use of Evaluation Findings

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1.   Over the past 40 years, various theories of evaluation utilization have been presented and debated, including the identification of factors that may affect utilization. Evaluation experts argue that whilst there has been a plethora of theoretical literature produced on this issue, there is a paucity of empirical studies involving the investigation of evaluation utilization itself.[1]

2.   Research suggests a range of meanings for 'utilization'. Based on the theoretical literature, evaluation utilization can be classified into four types. Early studies of the impact of an evaluation were based on directly observable effects, such as a policy change or the introduction of a new program initiative. This form of utilization is defined as *instrumental use* and refers to situations where an evaluation directly affects decision-making and influences changes in the program under review. Evidence for this type of utilization involves decisions and actions that arise from the evaluation, including the implementation of recommendations.

3.   The second type is *conceptual use* which is more indirect and relates to 'enlightenment' or generating knowledge and understanding of a given area.[2] Conceptual use refers to "the use of evaluations to influence thinking about issues in a general way."[3] Conceptual use occurs when an evaluation influences the way in which stakeholders think about a program, without any immediate new decisions being made about the program. Over time and given changes to the contextual and political circumstances surrounding the program, conceptual impacts can lead to instrumental impacts and hence significant program changes.

4.   *Political* or *symbolic use* involves the justification of decisions already made about a program.[4] For example, an evaluation is commissioned with no intention of utilizing the evaluation findings, but rather as a strategy to defer a decision. Alternatively, the evaluation follows after decision-making and provides a mechanism for retrospectively justifying decisions made on other grounds.

5.   Finally, *process use* concerns how individuals and organizations are impacted upon as a result of participating in an evaluation. Being involved in an evaluation may lead to changes in the thoughts and behaviors of individuals which then results in cultural and organizational change.[5] An example of process use is when those involved in the evaluation later say, "The impact on our program came not so much from the findings as from going through the thinking process that the evaluation required."[6]

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[1] Kohn, F., J. Pirkis, B. Morley, L. Naccaella, and G. Blashki. 2007. Utilisation of Findings from the Evaluation of a Primary Mental Health Care Initiative in Australia. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia* 7(2): 12–19.
[2] (i) Larsen, J. K. 1980. Knowledge Utilization: What Is It? *Science Communication* 1(3): 421–442.
     (ii) Owen, J. M., and P. J. Rogers. 1999. *Program Evaluation: Forms and Approaches.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
     (iii) Stufflebeam, D. L. 2001. *Evaluation Models: New Directions for Evaluation* 89. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
     (iv) Weiss, C. H. 1999. The Interface between Evaluation and Public Policy. *Evaluation* 5(4): 468–486.
[3] Rossi, P. H., and G. F. Freeman. 1985. *A Systematic Approach.* 3rd Edition. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.
[4] (i) Johnson, R. B. 1988. Towards a Theoretical Model of Evaluation Utilization. *Evaluation and Program Planning* 21:93–110.
     (ii) Patton, M. Q. (1977). *Utilization Focused Evaluation.* 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage. See also footnotes 2(ii) and (iv).
[5] Preskill, H., B. Zuckerman, and B. Matthews. 2003. An Exploratory Study of Process Use: Findings and Implications for Further Research. *American Journal of Evaluation* 24(4): 423–442. See also footnote 4(ii).
[6] Preskill, H. and V. J. Caracelli. 1996. *The Past, Present and Future Conceptions of Evaluation Use: Results from a Survey on Current Conceptions of Evaluation Use.* Paper presented at the American Evaluation Association, Atlanta, GA, 13.

6.   The international literature also identifies a range of factors that affect utilization. These factors can be broadly categorized into two groups:

(i)   characteristics of the evaluation—the way that the evaluation is conducted; and
(ii)   characteristics of the organizational setting in which findings are to be utilized—factors within the organization in which the evaluation is conducted.

7.   With respect to the characteristics of the evaluation, the literature identifies six factors. Of these, four relate to the evaluation itself: its relevance, credibility, quality and actual findings.[7] The remaining two factors concern the evaluator's communication practices and the timeliness of reporting.[8]

8.   The characteristics of organizational setting in which the evaluation is situated has a major impact on the extent to which the evaluation findings are used in *conceptual* or *instrumental* ways. Cousins and Leithwood[9] and Hudson-Mabbs[10] identified six organizational factors that affect utilization. These are commitment, information needs, competing information, personal characteristics, decision-making climate, political climate, and financial climate.

9.   Within this context, *commitment* refers to issues such as audience participation and attitudes towards the role of evaluation in program and policy change. Research indicates a linkage between commitment and knowledge use. The underlying assumption here is that through involvement in the negotiation and planning stages of the evaluation, the commitment of the audience can be developed or enhanced. Greene[11] found that audience participation in evaluation increased the likelihood that the findings of an evaluation would be utilized.

10.   *Information needs* relates to the perceived need for relevant knowledge. Weiss (footnote 2[iv]) found that the more an organization adopts a 'climate of rationality' and looks externally for new knowledge, the more likely it will turn to evaluation and use evaluation findings.

11.   Evaluations are only one of many potential sources of information that influence decisions about a program. The availability and perceived credibility of *competing information* significantly affects the utilization of evaluation studies (footnote 9).

12.   *Personal characteristics* refer to the attitudes of individuals towards evaluation and their influence and experience in organizations. Patton (footnote 4[ii]) has identified the role of significant individuals in influencing the application of evaluation findings. The characteristics of such individuals include leadership, interest, enthusiasm, determination, aggressiveness, and access to power. As Chelimsky[12] states, "Over and over again, the most important factor in assuring the use of evaluation findings was not the quality of the evaluation but the existence of a decision maker who wants and needs an evaluation and has commitment himself to implementing its findings."

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[7]   See also *The Program Evaluation Standards*. 1994. Sage: London.
[8]   See also Torres, R., H. Preskill, and M. Piontek. 2005. *Evaluation Strategies for Communicating and Reporting*. Sage: London.
[9]   Cousins, B. and K. Leithwood. 1986. Current Empirical Research on Evaluation Utilization. *Review of Educational Research* 56(3): 331–364.
[10] Hudson-Mabbs, S. 1993. Influences on the Use of Evaluation Information. Unpublished medical thesis. Murdoch University, Western Australia.
[11] Greene, J. 1988. Stakeholder Participation and Utilization in Program Evaluation. *Evaluation Review* 12: 91–116.
[12] Chelimsky, E., ed. 1977. *A Symposium on the Use of Evaluation by Federal Agencies*. Vol. 2. McLean, VA: Mitre Corporation.

13.   *Decision-making climate* relates to the context in which decisions about the program are made and the type of decision to be made. Cousins and Leithwood (footnote 9) discovered that decision-making issues were an important factor affecting evaluation utilization. These decisions can be classified as retrospective or prospective. Retrospective decisions are for justification and accountability reasons and prospective decisions are for the future, for example to develop or improve a program.

14.   *Political climate* refers to the political orientation of the organization and the existing support for the program. Research indicates that the usage of evaluation findings was politically influenced at both the organisational and extra-organizational levels (footnote 9). If the evaluation's findings are consistent with the organizations internal and external political climate, utilization is more likely.

15.   *Financial climate* involves the economic consequences of any changes to the program arising from the evaluation. Put simply, if evaluation findings suggest program changes that require only limited additional expenditure, then the findings are more likely to be taken on board. Accordingly, it is imperative that evaluators consider the financial implications of their recommendations.

16.   Despite the importance and potential in increasing the use of evaluation findings, only limited empirical research has been conducted on utilization. Owen[13] provides a comprehensive overview 'from evaluation findings to utilization' and states that most of the empirical studies on utilization of evaluation findings have focused on instrumental use and very few studies have attempted to measure conceptual use. More importantly, Owen (footnote 13) highlights the interactive nature of the variables that lead to utilization and that very few studies have examined multiple causes of utilization of evaluation findings.

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[13] Owen, J. M. 2006. *Program Evaluation: Forms and Approaches.* 3rd Edition. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.