

Evaluating Career Development: Fact and Fantasy

Warning: Some misleading articles describe perfect projects. Get real. Read how one experienced external evaluator maintained idealism and realism through the ups and downs of a project.

This may seem obvious, but it makes no sense to try to do any kind of evaluative study or data collection unless someone wants it done

By ROBERT W. STUMP

Whenever I see an article about evaluation models, how to design follow-up studies, or career-development programs, I fantasize that this may, at long last, be THE definitive work on "Organizational Career-Development Programs that Work!" or some such title.

I imagine its contents: A review of many carefully conducted evaluative follow-up studies of career development in organizations, each with conclusive, statistically valid observations about positive things people do for themselves and their organizations as "outcomes" from participation in career-development activities. The article concludes with fairly straightforward cost-benefit analyses proving the programs had a positive effect on profits.

This fantasy has deep roots in my past experience and in my sense of what would be right, good, and moral. Many HRD professionals agree that such information *ought* to be collected. They are motivated, in part, by the expectation that training and development could then claim a more secure and "legitimate" role relative to line functions in organizations.

But in reality projects rarely achieve the clear-cut, measurable perfection implied by some articles I've read. Here I'd like to share with my colleagues some personal,

less fantastic reflections to help give confidence to others interested in projects similar to the one I describe or to those who may share my fantasy and want to work toward its true fulfillment.

The project

In the spring of 1983 I was invited to work with TCI, Inc., a Washington, D.C., firm that was bidding on a contract to deliver a series of career-development workshops to personnel in the Naval Surface Weapons Center's (NSWC) two installations at Dahlgren, Virginia, and White Oak, Maryland. I was to design and conduct a follow-up study for determining whether the workshops achieved immediate postworkshop objectives and whether they had longer-term effects as well.

After initial negotiations about the study's scope and substance, I gathered, stored, analyzed, and reported information on the NSWC career-development program's progress every six months until the project ended two years later. By then 220 employees had participated in the workshops; 171 were in sessions that were followed up six months later, and 91 of these reported on what had happened over the longer term. I also had information from 82 supervisors of participants.

What I knew, did, and learned

The sponsor wanted the project and was willing to pay for it. This may seem obvious, but it makes no sense—especially for an external consultant—to

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try to do any kind of evaluative study or data collection unless someone wants it done.

NSWC requested the follow-up and specified that it should include participants' first impressions about workshop success and assessment of workshops' impact six months later. The cost of the follow-up study was 6 percent of the total contract cost.

I involved the instructors and sponsor's representative in the study's design. I worked with the workshop designers and the sponsoring agency's representative in the initial project stages. I had some impact—although minimal—on the proposal's contents. Everyone agreed that we should work out the evaluation design in more detail before holding the first workshop. The dilemma this created for me was that we would have to make many crucial design decisions fairly quickly while I would still be "the new kid."

People from the sponsoring agency and TCI already had working relationships and had formed opinions about the workshops and the follow-up study. Now we had to build a new collaborative atmosphere and relationships so we could get on with decision making. Because of the short time, we knew we wouldn't have the luxury of working through the full range of outcomes and impacts that could be expected or for fully discussing follow-up design options.

Consequently we quickly agreed on the following design parameters:

- *A formal control group design would not be possible.* The time and energy needed to select and monitor a control group wasn't available within the agency. What's more, since participation would be voluntary, and no one was sure who would attend the workshops, it wasn't possible to describe the composition of a control group. Besides, the sponsor's representatives didn't want to deny or delay workshop volunteers' participation because they had been selected as control group members.
- *We would gather data from participants' supervisors.* Supervisors were already involved in the process because volunteers needed their approval to attend sessions. We thought we should ask supervisors for their perceptions about the effect of workshops on the participants they supervised.

We didn't believe gathering this information would harm participants in any way. But we respected participants' apprehensions and decided to let them decide—individually—whether we could ask their supervisors to fill out questionnaires.

I made proposals to TCI and

NSWC when they weren't sure what to do. In the design stage, it became clear that my primary task was to help decide how information would be gathered. The others had a general idea of what they wanted to find out through the study, but weren't sure exactly what questions to ask or how to process the responses to get to the answers they were looking for.

Our discussions pointed out that some of the initial questions might not work to the data they sought. I often asked, "What would you do if participants answer this way rather than that?" Responses like, "I'm not sure" or "It wouldn't make any difference" were signs that questions weren't asked the right way.

To make our decisions about information-gathering, we needed a framework for outlining the scope of

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evaluation data. Eventually we agreed that the desired short- and long-term follow-up information fell into the following four categories:

- *Attitudes about the workshops themselves*—Did the workshops meet objectives the agency had set forth? A short questionnaire given to participants at the close of each workshop served as the common-place "smiles test."

- *Actions that participants are expected to take after the workshop*—These included exploring alternative careers and career paths, identifying job elements that would increase personal job satisfaction, and using recommended resources and techniques for obtaining occupational information.

- *Job quality changes* in work circumstances to improve job satisfaction, perception of personal and professional growth, and quality of working conditions.

- *Productivity increases* in participants' abilities to plan for their career advancement and to transfer these to their job situations through better planning, anticipating future needs, getting along with others in task groups, and so on.

We decided not to use standardized instruments. One question we had was whether to use standardized instruments or to develop our own questionnaires for measuring the attitudinal information wanted. We addressed this question by looking at the kinds of reports and other

output available from various sources, to see whether their information would help the sponsor or the trainers make decisions.

We also considered the validity of the instruments' specific questions and constructs for this agency's personnel. In short, would the standardized instruments measure what the sponsor was interested in measuring?

A third consideration was cost. Instrument developers charge one fee for the forms themselves and another for processing or reporting. Was the sponsoring agency willing to pay these, and would the purchased information's character and nature be worth the expense?

The decision not to purchase or use standardized instruments was plain enough: The information didn't seem to support decision making and the concepts

measured by the instruments weren't quite right for the sponsoring organization. The additional cost just wasn't warranted.

We made the follow-up process as unobtrusive as possible. Gathering information for an evaluation follow-up process can be a burdensome chore for participants and trainers alike. So we worked to integrate data collection into the flow of topics and experiences that were part of the workshop's design.

First, we administered the initial "job quality" opinionnaire in the context of discussions about what participants like or don't like about their jobs. Then we distributed the workshop smiles test at the end of workshops as one way of getting verbal reactions about the five days. And finally the action-planning phase of the workshop became the basis for addressing subsequent questions about whether participants followed through on their one- and six-month plans.

Follow-up data helped the sponsor make timely programmatic decisions. We originally intended workshop information to guide the sponsor's major decisions; we figured the sponsor would base decisions on whether or not workshops were accomplishing overall agency objectives.


Sometimes, the data also provided more detailed views. For example, we presented workshops at two of the sponsoring agency's installations. Things *seemed* to be go-

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ing better at one site than at the other. Follow-up study information revealed that at the site with the less-successful record there was higher participation by women and by people from lower organizational levels coupled with lower rates of supervisory participation in data collection.

During another workshop a trainer became ill, necessitating changes in the workshop material and presentation. Not all the adjustments went smoothly. Participants made many negative comments about the new material. Nonetheless, the smiles test for this workshop—compared to information from other workshops' smiles tests—indicated that the negative impact was limited to only one or two of the workshop's important objectives.

We accepted the fact that the follow-up study ultimately made little difference in whether or not the program continued. You don't engage in this kind of follow-up data collection without the conscious or unconscious expectation that decisions about continuing the program will be based on results of your study. You also learn fairly quickly that this may not be so.

In this case, the information we collected lead the sponsor to conclude that the career-development workshops *were* meeting organizational objectives and that the participants later made their career decisions and conducted their career searches in ways the workshops had taught them.

In March of 1984 the agency did not renew the contract. Apparently this action was part of an overall cutback of training and other human resource activities because of reduced budgets.

Hope and caution

Perhaps if my fantasy comes true, future successful programs will stand a better chance of survival. Then again, we who look to information from follow-up studies to solidify training and development's place in organizations should be wary of putting too many eggs in the evaluation basket and being betrayed by our own fantasies.