

EVALUATION IN THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA: ADAPTING TO THE “NEW WAY”

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Abstract: This article describes the evolution of evaluation from its traditional meaning to a more generic application in the Government of Alberta since 1994. The major influences in this transition have been business planning with its emphasis on performance measurement, more open government, an emphasis on practicality, scrutiny, the “empowerment” wave, and a strategic, forward-looking focus. The article concludes that the application of traditional evaluation will remain inconsistent, but the application of evaluative activities will increase.

Résumé: L'article décrit le cheminement de l'évaluation, de sa signification traditionnelle à une application plus générale dans le gouvernement de l'Alberta depuis 1994. Les facteurs qui ont le plus influencé cette transition ont été la planification financière, avec l'importance qu'elle accorde à la mesure de rendement, la plus grande ouverture du gouvernement, l'importance attribuée à l'esprit pratique, la surveillance rapprochée, la vague de «l'habilitation», et une orientation stratégique vers l'avenir. L'article conclut que l'évaluation traditionnelle continuera d'être appliquée sans uniformité, mais que l'application des activités d'évaluation augmentera.

■ This article describes and comments on the use of evaluation as a management tool in the Government of Alberta in the recent past (since 1994) and currently, and discusses its prospects for the future. Statements describing the situation in the Government of Alberta do not apply to all individuals or parts of the government, but are intended to describe the larger, more dominant threads or themes.

The content herein is based on the contributions of eleven individuals, including three consultants and eight Government of Alberta administrators, as well as on the author's experience as an external consultant to the Government of Alberta over the past 10 years. Nine contributors responded to a set of questions about evaluation in the

Government of Alberta. Responses were given either in written form or in a personal interview. Two of the contributors reviewed drafts of the article. It is important to note that the contributors and writer are most familiar with the areas of employment, education and training, and social services within the Government of Alberta.

The internal management of the Government of Alberta has changed significantly since 1994, and these changes have affected the use of evaluation as a management tool.

EVALUATION POLICY IN THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

How Is Evaluation Defined in the Alberta Government?

The word *evaluation* is currently used in two main ways within the Government of Alberta. Most often it is used generically, as similar in meaning to *assessment*, *review*, and *research*. Less often it is used in its more “traditional” or “academic” sense, where it is associated with a study done by an external evaluator with a research methodology derived from social policy research methods.

The term *evaluation* seems to be used more now within the Government of Alberta than it was pre-1994. Historically, evaluation was primarily the domain of individuals with specific training and experience in social science research methods. Now, almost all public administrators are involved in evaluation types of activities (*evaluation* in the generic sense) as a result of the changes in public-sector management. These activities include defining program objectives, developing approaches for determining and demonstrating whether program objectives are met, and designing and implementing information-gathering strategies to support continuous improvement.

Does an Evaluation Policy Exist within the Government of Alberta?

Evaluation and related activities are encouraged within the Government of Alberta through its emphasis on accountability, performance measurement, and business planning as required by the Government Accountability Act. Even though no formal evaluation policy exists (for traditional evaluation), public administrators use a variety of tools, including evaluation (traditional) to implement results-based management and to achieve accountability for public funds spent.

Evaluation (traditional) is not a prominently or consistently used management tool within the Government of Alberta. Indeed, little exists that formally describes the role of evaluation. Exceptions to this occur where specific legislation or policy includes the requirement or option for evaluation of specific programs or services.

This is different from Saskatchewan's Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, for example, which has given evaluation a formally articulated, clear, and prominent role within a performance management context. This Saskatchewan department has developed and formally outlined an approach that identifies evaluation as "an integral part of the ongoing management and operation of the department" (Saskatchewan Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, 2001, p. 1), with clearly identified approaches, links with performance measurement and accountability, and evaluation expectations for programming (traditional evaluation).

How Is Evaluation Undertaken in the Government of Alberta?

Evaluation (traditional) is undertaken at the request of individual program managers, as a requirement of a specific program/service area (particularly where federal/provincial agreements are in place), or occasionally at the request of a senior official or policy branch of a department. The amount of this type of evaluation (traditional) seems to have decreased slightly within the Government of Alberta since 1994, in the opinion of those surveyed.

In undertaking evaluations in the Government of Alberta, there are no requirements or a common practice for reporting on or responding to results (other provinces require "management responses" and/or action plans in response to evaluations). This is left to the discretion of the individual managers or steering committees responsible.

In most cases, external consultants assist with the traditional evaluation work, taking on responsibility for all aspects of the evaluation under the direction of a Steering Committee.

Evaluation (generic) has gradually increased as a focus of programs and services. This is a result of the requirement for "nested" business planning¹ and an overall emphasis on results-based, accountable government programs and services. Planning and reporting requirements include annual departmental and government report-

ing on goals, targets, achievements over the past year, and performance indicators (usually quantitative measures intended to illustrate “progress” or “achievement” in relation to government initiatives). In this sense, generic evaluation activities are widespread, even though they may or may not be described as evaluations.

Evaluative activities include reviews, research, stakeholder input, consultation, information gathering and analysis, and identification of gaps, for example. Specific examples are (from Government of Alberta departmental business plans):

- “In conjunction with student leaders, a research-consulting firm will be engaged to identify gaps in Alberta’s student assistance programs” (Alberta Learning, 1999).
- “A review will be undertaken to improve the way that programs and services help people find and maintain employment, including disadvantaged groups” (Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 1999).

Particularly at the senior levels of government, task forces or reviews are tools used to achieve goals similar to those of traditional evaluation. Examples are:

- The Premiers’ Task Force on Children at Risk assessed current programming and services and made recommendations to government for improvements (Alberta Children’s Services, 2000).
- A retired judge was recruited to lead a review of the Workers’ Compensation Board appeals system (Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 1999).
- An MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning was used to assess the current situation and make recommendations for future direction and improvement (Alberta Learning, 1999).

These tools or approaches are evaluative in nature, with similarities to and differences from traditional evaluation. A common characteristic of these preferred evaluative activities is more involvement of internal staff and politicians rather than hiring of external consultants. This has advantages from several perspectives: public administrators learn directly from the process; stakeholders provide input directly to politicians and administrators; and the process and results are guaranteed to be sensitive to the overall context of the current government.

As Government of Alberta administrators have become more involved in performance measurement, they have become more confident in undertaking evaluation-related activities themselves as opposed to hiring an external evaluation expert, or they may take on a more significant role in the project.

In summary, we have seen a slight decrease in the use of traditional evaluation in the Government of Alberta, and an increase in the use of generic evaluation activities that may or may not be described as evaluations. No formal statement or common practice exists for evaluation as a public-sector management tool. Rather, the approach (including terminology) is tailored to the specific situation and time, with research and evaluative activities designed to support continuous improvement, assessment, stakeholder input, and accountability.

WHAT HAS AFFECTED EVALUATION IN THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA?

The traditional field of evaluation has experienced considerable turbulence as the Alberta Government has manoeuvred to implement lower cost, more innovative approaches, as well as increase its accountability through public reporting and focus on results.

The main influences on evaluation in the Government of Alberta have been the following:

1. The introduction of and commitment to business planning, including performance measurement
2. More open government
3. An emphasis on practicality
4. Some scrutiny
5. The empowerment wave
6. The strategic, forward-looking emphasis

The Introduction of, and Commitment to, Business Planning, Including Performance Measurement

Alberta was the first provincial government in the country to adopt publicly reported results based performance measurement, and our leadership has encouraged others to follow, using our system as a model to develop their own. (Alberta Treasury, 2000, p. 1)

Of all the factors affecting the evolution of evaluation in the Government of Alberta, the introduction of business planning, with its performance measurement component, has had the greatest impact.

Beginning in 1994, all Government of Alberta departments were required to submit three-year business plans that included core businesses, goals, strategies, and performance indicators, according to the requirements of the Government Accountability Act. Also in that year, the plans were required to demonstrate overall reductions in departmental budgets (approximately 20% on average, over three years). The plans had to be submitted to and approved by standing policy committees and Treasury Board, the central department that facilitated the cabinet-driven transformation to performance-based government.

The environment for government managers changed drastically. They needed numbers that were performance indicators to report annually. They had to link their programs and services with overall Government of Alberta goals. Every year a report on progress and a revised three-year plan were needed. Indicators and measures were scrutinized by Alberta Treasury and senior officials. Managers could only report information that they had, so they focused on information that was available and worked on how to get information that would be more helpful.

For evaluation in the generic sense, this change was supportive. The business planning process (including performance indicators) was intended to support continuous evaluation of how government could improve itself and its performance reporting. The need to gather and use information to assess results and efficiency under the systematic process of business planning and reporting reinforced an evaluative approach to managing government.

For evaluation in its traditional role, the change was unsettling. Resources for traditional evaluation were diverted to performance measurement and business planning, or reduced. Traditional evaluation approaches were not called upon to provide the information needed by the business planning units. Evaluation units and individuals were reorganized to reflect the new priorities. Branches that previously included the word *evaluation* in their title adopted the performance measurement terminology, often omitting the word *evaluation* from the new letterhead.

In some areas of the Alberta government, it was difficult for traditional evaluators to embrace the new tools; internal reporting was not objective (compared to external evaluation studies), and the information and analysis were not comprehensive or in-depth. Evaluators found themselves at odds with the “new kids on the block” who worked on business planning, the new priority. Traditional approaches to evaluation were typically not included in the planning process.

Since 1997, an increasing emphasis on annual performance indicators has occurred as a result of the introduction of performance bonuses. Public administrators, and departments, receive bonuses depending on performance relative to plans. This has increased the potential “risk” associated with doing traditional evaluation work.

In summary, the Alberta government has made a significant investment in implementing performance measurement as its key internal management tool. This has been positive for evaluation types of activities, and reinforcing for the basic principles of evaluation. However, for traditional evaluation, this strategy has raised questions, particularly as performance measurement is largely internally driven and managed (traditional evaluation is typically external), and performance measurement lacks clear linkages to social policy research (is not concerned with notions such as incrementality and cost/benefit analysis, for example).

More Open Government

The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (1995) increased public access to evaluation-related information in Alberta. Along with business planning came an emphasis on reporting to the public; the Government of Alberta publishes the document *Measuring Up* annually for the Alberta public.

This has increased the public aspect of evaluation work and information. Previously, an evaluation could be undertaken and used solely for internal purposes. Now, evaluation work is more public, adding to the political sensitivity of having an external evaluator comment on the success of government programming.

Evaluation results can now become public (through the Act). They can affect departmental annual reporting (which is public). Also, they can affect the financial remuneration of departmental staff,

and the overall departmental budget (up to 20% of deputy ministers' annual compensation depends on performance relative to goals and targets identified in ministry business plans and individual performance contracts). Undertaking a traditional evaluation has become more complex than it was when results could be contained within a small group.

FOIP (the privacy side of the act) has also increased the sensitivities associated with releasing individual information for evaluation purposes. The rules and regulations of the privacy provisions of the act restrict sharing client information with third parties for evaluation purposes (particularly for third-party follow-up).

An Emphasis on Practicality

With cutbacks, reorganizations, and heavy workloads for remaining administrators, little time remained for activities that were not viewed as necessary, clearly beneficial, and a priority. This environment has persisted; newness is continual. Government reorganization, deputy minister changes, cabinet changes, and staff changes have recurred since 1994, with the latest departmental reorganization announced May 25, 1999. That change required that all departmental business plans be restated to reflect the new organization.

The information and approaches used by traditional evaluations (particularly those involving comparison or control groups) were viewed as too costly, not able to provide timely and relevant information, or not a priority. Contributing to this were these factors:

- The lack of time and other resources needed to implement the scientific methodologies, along with the unclear impact or benefit of the information that would be generated;
- Constraints around the availability and use of comparison or control groups (or comparative information of any kind), and the limitations of past studies that used those methodologies to provide information that made an impact;
- Recognition of the complexity of social problems, their causes and solutions, and factors that affect them. This complexity makes it difficult for traditional evaluation to assess, in a convincing way, the impact of programs, policies, or services, the inter-relationships between various facets of public policy and the external environment, or the longer term implications or effects of alternatives.

Alberta government managers increasingly look at a wider range of types of information as valuable for helping them to report, analyze, continuously improve, and achieve accountability. They recognize the limitations of each information source, and pay particular attention to the need for timely information (based on the annual planning cycle) at a reasonable cost. As one administrator said: "Program managers prefer information that is approximately right as long as it is timely and relevant and better than existing information, hearsay, or myths. This is preferred to information produced by a specific, evaluation-driven, scientifically based methodology designed to produce accurate results." Administrators do seek to gather credible and reliable information through sound research approaches, recognizing the limitations of alternative approaches (including traditional evaluation approaches).

Some Scrutiny

With the arrival of the partnership and inclusive approach to program and service delivery, new people at the evaluation table brought new perspectives. Trying to assess what would have happened without the program, a key part of traditional evaluation, or trying to assess cost/benefit of programming was viewed by some as unnecessary, not feasible, or not particularly relevant. Not offering programs and services was often not an option, so the concepts of formative and summative evaluation were not particularly relevant for most program/service areas. The focus in Alberta's provincial government has been on continuous improvement (monitoring), innovation (sharing good practices), alternative approaches (privatization, performance-based contracts), and the like, rather than on periodic, thorough assessment of specific program areas to assess whether they should be continued.

The credibility of external researchers or consultants came under public scrutiny where external reports were publicly quoted in support of various sides of policy debates. Instances where evaluations were assessed as being "inaccurate," "unfair," or "inconclusive," or where external evaluators were viewed as having succumbed to political pressure to reach certain conclusions, affected the credibility and the perceived value of traditional evaluations, in some areas of government, at certain points in time.

In some instances, external consultants were viewed as insensitive to the current context of government, particularly its limitations,

its current focus, and its new directions. Others point to the recommendations and findings of past evaluations (done in Alberta and in other jurisdictions) that have not been implemented, even though they are generally accepted.

The Empowerment Wave

The business planning process aimed to link levels of government through goals. Departmental goals were to be linked to overall government goals; branch goals were to link with departmental goals, and so on. Through this planning/reporting process, decision-making at the “lowest” level would be enabled. The Government of Alberta wants to “macro-manage” rather than “micro-manage.” This means that individual program/service areas took on responsibility for planning, reporting, and evaluation in the generic sense. At this “community” level, administrators may or may not choose traditional evaluation as a tool. If they view evaluation as threatening, or as not adding value to measures that are gathered on a more continuous basis, they would select monitoring or research as tools for gathering information needed for management and accountability purposes (needs assessments and reporting on results, for example). The adoption of self-evaluation approaches has led to a wide range of approaches to achieving results-based management and accountability. This diversity, a result of empowerment and partnership approaches, is welcomed by the Alberta government.

The Strategic, Forward-Looking Emphasis

The Alberta government adapted strategic approaches to management, including adapting private-sector management approaches. Its focus has become forward looking and strategic. “Forward looking” implies less focus on evaluating past activities and greater focus on setting and achieving goals. “Strategic” implies a clear overall direction based on sound assessment. The *People, Prosperity and Preservation* document of 1997 was a defining piece that articulated where the Alberta government was going, how and why, and all departments looked to it as defining priorities and goals. Focus turned towards the government’s overall accountability, more so than the functioning of independent program areas (which were increasingly recognized as not being independent at all of each other, but intricately linked). Key questions to be addressed by government were broad in scope (not questions to be addressed by evaluation-related

activities), such as whether to privatize certain health-related services, or how to introduce an incentive into the education system (kindergarten to Grade 12) for innovation and good performance. It was difficult to fit traditional evaluation into the tool-set needed to resolve the big questions of the day and to get the high-priority jobs done.

THE FUTURE OF EVALUATION IN THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

Performance measurement has been successful in focusing the public service on results, accountability, and reporting. It forces the asking of good questions and has resulted in a set of activities that are positive (planning, thinking through desired results and objectives, reporting, and linking parts of government).

However, key performance indicators are limited in what they indicate. For example, the key performance indicator for employment programs is the percentage employed post-intervention, with a 70% target rate (according to Alberta Human Resources and Employment's departmental business plan). Evaluators and program managers involved in employment programs are aware of the shortcomings of using this type and this particular level of performance indicator. Common approaches to measurement are not in place, so numbers are not necessarily comparable. Administrators have worked on defining indicators, approaches to measurement, and data gathering at significant cost. It is difficult to link indicators and other performance measurement information to what government has done (was an improvement due to government initiatives or to other external factors?). Also, with senior officials' compensation tied to target results (as reflected in performance indicators), the dynamics of using performance indicators to assess government programs and services are more complex (though note that the portion of an individual's compensation tied to performance measures is relatively small).

Although performance measurement has accomplished many positives for the Government of Alberta, the information it produces has had limited effect on policies, programs, and services.

Traditional evaluation does have strong pockets of support within the Government of Alberta and the Alberta consulting community. In some areas, public-sector managers use traditional evaluation as a valued tool. For example, the Health Innovation Fund has required

that all funded organizations and the fund itself be evaluated, with sharing of information a key goal of evaluation, and the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement includes evaluation as a focus, although whether or how this is to be done is yet undetermined.

CONCLUSIONS

Since 1994, evaluation has had to find its fit in an increasingly crowded realm of management tools used for accountability and assessment in the Alberta government. Whereas performance measurement is a top-down, systematic approach with strong leadership from the cabinet and central agencies of government, evaluation has had to figure out its place from the bottom up, at the same time that resources dedicated to traditional evaluation have been reduced. The lack of traditional, broad-based training for government administrators, and the lack of formal commitment to and articulation of evaluation policy, has led to different levels of understanding and interpretations of just what traditional evaluation is. The result has been differing points of view about the relative merits of what is called evaluation compared to other approaches.

Considering these observations and conclusions, several predictions are possible for traditional evaluation in Alberta in the next five to ten years:

- The generic types of activities similar to evaluation will continue to develop in the Alberta government. Performance measurement will be refined. More meaningful approaches will be developed that recognize the complexity of public policy, programs, and services. Quantitative measures will be a smaller piece of a broader, more contextual picture; and alternative measures, indicators, and analytical approaches will be developed.
- There will be increasing involvement in evaluation types of activities (evaluation in the generic sense). For example, one might expect more activity in the area of indicator development, goal and objective setting, accountability frameworks, reporting on results, program reviews, assessment of alternative service delivery approaches, and research that attempts to address very specific questions of interest. These activities will increasingly focus on client satisfaction and client/stakeholder feedback, including determining the value and impact of programs and services.

- Individual program managers will continue to limit their use of traditional evaluation, as they become more focused on performance indicators, continuous monitoring, gathering stakeholder input, and various types of research that gathers information useful for planning and reporting purposes. All involved in programs and services will gradually become increasingly skilled at defining objectives, determining whether those objectives are being achieved, and how best to achieve them.
- Evaluation will become more of a collaborative process. Activities and approaches will be driven increasingly by managers and other decision-makers. As a result of this, scientific approaches will be blended with other approaches for gathering information that serves clear purposes, and adds value to programs and services.
- Evaluation will be used to substantiate or verify what program managers already know or sense, particularly where results are good and there are lessons to be shared with other administrators, levels of government, or jurisdictions.
- Senior levels of government will continue to favour the development of the performance measurement system, because it produces timely information and allows for immediate response and adaptation; it is viewed as a key part of the business planning process; it links various departments and levels of the government; it represents a significant investment; and it is driven by cabinet and supported by Alberta Treasury.
- There will be continuing inconsistent (not integrated into operations, and not embodied in a framework or policy) but increasing support for traditional evaluation-related activities. This is anticipated where “innovative” programming is developed, where partnerships are involved (particularly with the federal government, for example, Employment Assistance for Persons with Disabilities, Labour Market Development Agreement, and National Child Benefit programming areas); where “super-accountability” may be required (the area is particularly sensitive to public scrutiny); and where important broad policy questions are to be addressed. Evaluation will focus on the sharing of information related to “good” practices and on achieving continuous improvements, and will not focus on social policy research-based methodologies. As cost reduction and efficiency become less of a focus of the Alberta government, more funds

will be directed towards answering broader public policy questions, particularly in the areas of education and health. In the best-case scenario, senior levels will develop a framework for evaluation across government, or even in one specific department, and evaluation strategies and activities will be included in the business planning process.

- When evaluations (both traditional and generic) are undertaken, more emphasis will be placed on communications. This will involve all those involved in the evaluation throughout the process, and after the evaluation is completed. Innovative communications strategies will be used to increase the value of evaluation-related activities to as many people as possible, and to contribute to an informed public regarding public policies and programs.

As long as evaluation is seen as a more traditional and perhaps academic as opposed to a practical tool in Alberta, it will likely be used here and there within the Alberta government, as opposed to becoming a widespread and formally endorsed tool. Unless the Alberta government (or the evaluation community) can develop a new, Alberta-made approach that adapts traditional evaluation approaches to the “new way” of government (including a clear role in relation to the current leading ladies, performance measurement and business planning), Alberta is unlikely to include evaluation more systematically in its management.

For the professional evaluator working with the Alberta government, the new evaluation approaches — particularly the evaluator’s role as a team player and a facilitator — are more likely to be valued. Evaluators must clearly demonstrate and commit to adding value to public-sector management, and ultimately to programs and services provided to the public. Evaluators need to be familiar with the particular policy or programming area under study, so that they can add advisory value within the appropriate policy, program, and political context. They need to be in tune with and adapt to the “new way” of doing business within the Alberta Government, building on those aspects of traditional evaluation that are a fit with the public-sector environment in Alberta at this time, and leaving those aspects that do not fit, behind.

NOTE

- 1 “Nested” means links between various levels of government.

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