AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE TRADITIONAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Brian Marriott
Christopher Cameron
Alberta Health Services
Calgary, Alberta

Abstract: External information is commonly collected for, and provided to, evaluation stakeholders without giving due consideration to their precise needs. As a result, evaluation resources are often inefficiently consumed and the impact of the evaluation process is diminished. The External Information Search and Formatting (EISF) process is a new approach that seeks to avoid such an outcome. This tool requires that the information searcher collaboratively work with his or her stakeholders to ensure that their informational needs are well met and the information is presented in a manner that is useful to them.

Résumé : Les informations externes sont habituellement recueillies pour, et fournies aux, parties prenantes de l’évaluation sans prendre suf- fisamment en considération leurs besoins précis. Par conséquent, les ressources d’évaluation sont souvent utilisées d’une manière inefficace et l’impact du processus d’évaluation est diminué. Le processus External Information Search and Formatting (EISF) est une nouvelle approche qui cherche à éviter de telles situations. Cet outil exige que la personne qui recherche de l’information travaille en collaboration avec les parties prenantes pour garantir que leurs besoins informationnels sont bien satisfaits et que les informations sont présentées d’une manière qui leur est utile.

The term “literature review” is widely used in both applied and academic settings. For most, it is used to describe a process in which peer-reviewed articles are sourced, surveyed, and ultimately summarized in order to illustrate the current state of knowledge on a particular subject, verify the significance of a research question, or inform the design of future research in a given area (Patrick & Munro, 2004; Schmelzer, 2008).
However, in an applied discipline such as evaluation, often there is a need to go beyond the peer-reviewed body of knowledge and into unpublished sources of information such as government and professional reports (i.e., the grey literature). At times even undocumented information from credible sources is explored. Describing such a process as a “literature review” seems at best inaccurate and at worst misleading.

The authors offer a more apt term to describe this process, namely the “external information search.” It is hoped that this term encompasses the notion that, in an applied discipline such as evaluation, where the informational needs of the stakeholders vary significantly from project to project, all of the available information external to the project must be explored for potential relevance and applicability.

THE EXTERNAL INFORMATION SEARCH AND FORMATTING (EISF) PROCESS

The External Information Search and Formatting (EISF) process is a new approach that was developed by the authors to help evaluators overcome some of the challenges associated with the external information search. The EISF process consists of two separate but interrelated processes: one process associated with the search for external information and one process associated with the formatting of external information.

External Information Search Process

There are two key elements of the external information search process: query development and search parameter development. Both of these elements are described in detail below.

Query and search parameter development

too often, it is the evaluator who is left to determine the focus of an external information search. That is, upon provision of an evaluation topic, and selection of the external information search methodology, the evaluator is faced with the daunting task of deciding which elements of the topic area to explore. Frequently the end result is an iterative process of information searching and formatting that, because it is blind to the evaluation stakeholders, ultimately falls short of the stakeholders’ expectations. Engaging the evaluation stakeholders in the early stages of the process, namely the query and search
parameter development processes, seeks to avoid these shortfalls and strives to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the methodology.

When developing queries the onus is on the evaluator to work collaboratively with the evaluation stakeholders for the purpose of developing a better understanding of what types of external information are required. It is generally so that the scope of the evaluation topic area will dictate the number of queries that are developed, with narrower topic areas typically having fewer queries than larger ones. The specificity of the query or queries is of paramount importance in order to facilitate effective and efficient external information searching. Thus, once the evaluator has developed a preliminary list of queries, the evaluator should submit the queries to the evaluation stakeholders for review and feedback. The purpose of this feedback is twofold: to revise the queries already developed and to add queries that have been previously overlooked. Once the query review is complete and the query or queries are finalized, the search parameters can then be negotiated for each individual query.

When negotiating search parameters the onus is on the evaluator to work collaboratively with the evaluation stakeholders for the purpose of developing robust and informed search guidelines and boundaries. Evaluators are often generalists, possessing significant expertise in all things evaluation, yet typically having little topic area knowledge. Thus, soliciting search terms (and, if appropriate, potential search-term combinations) that are relevant to the body of external information that is being searched is of paramount importance from both an effectiveness and efficiency standpoint. By working with stakeholders on a query by query basis, date, population, and language limits can also be established (if appropriate) as can the sources of information that are of most interest to the evaluation stakeholders (academic sources, grey sources, or both).

External Information Formatting Process

There are two key elements of the external information formatting process: query retention and determination of formatting. Both of these elements are described in detail below.

Query retention and determination of formatting

too often, it is the evaluator who is left to determine how external information will be formatted. That is, subsequent to locating relevant
external information and determining what information to retain, the evaluator is faced with the daunting task of deciding how the information would be best presented to the information consumer. Frequently the end result is the production of a well-written, yet user-unfriendly, document that is time-consuming to read and therefore not well-utilized. Engaging the evaluation stakeholders in the early stages of the process, query retention and determination of formatting, seeks to avoid these shortfalls and strives to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the methodology.

When undertaking query retention the onus is on the evaluator to work collaboratively with the evaluation stakeholders for the purpose of selecting what external information to retain for formatting. It is sometimes the case that some of the external information retained yields little instructive information. Dedicating evaluation resources to the synthesis and presentation of this information is therefore not optimal. The determination of formatting process holds that, rather than attempting to make something out of nothing, it is better to communicate this finding to the evaluation stakeholders early in the process in order to refocus formatting resources to areas of potential impact.

When determining how external information will be formatted, the onus is on the evaluator to work collaboratively with the evaluation stakeholders for the purpose of deciding how to present the retained queries in a manner than maximizes the potential for utilization and impact. By engaging stakeholders at this level, the evaluator puts him/herself in a position to produce a product that is aligned with stakeholders’ expectations and circumstances, therefore facilitating use of the information and enhancing consumer satisfaction and evaluative impact.

The external information formatting process offers seven distinct levels of formatting (see Figure 1). Each level builds on the preceding level, starting with Level 1 which is tantamount to an annotated bibliography and ending with Level 7 which closely approximates a publication-ready manuscript. That is, Level 1 involves providing stakeholders with only tables of all citations for each retained query; Level 2 has the evaluator logically order the citation tables within each retained query; Level 3 involves developing contextual information for each of the citation tables within each retained query; in Level 4, the citation table format is removed entirely, and well written individual summaries are created for each citation within
each retained query; Level 5 has the evaluator develop interpretive information that is used to link all of the citations within each query; in Level 6, introductory and concluding summaries are developed for each retained query; and, finally, Level 7 has the evaluator integrate the introductory, individual, and concluding summaries with the contextual and interpretative information within each retained query and allows for the integration of multiple retained queries into one document.

Additionally, the external information formatting process allows for evaluation stakeholders to submit additional formatting requests. Examples of such requests include translation to a language other than English and selection of a particular writing level (e.g. remedial versus professional).

SITUATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT PROMOTE EFFECTIVENESS

The EISF process is robust and from the authors’ experience, is effective in a wide range of situations. That is not to say that this process will “work” in every situation. The EISF process is particularly effective in situations that have the following five characteristics:

- The evaluation stakeholders within the situation are highly motivated to acquire and use external information to support their decision-making processes.
- The evaluation stakeholders within the situation have more than a cursory understanding of what they are hoping to learn from a search for external information.
- The answer to one or more evaluation question is contingent on the acquisition of targeted external information.
- The evaluation stakeholders within the situation feel pressure to deliver a precise and articulate document that provides a concise sense of what is occurring in the field that surrounds their practice to either internal or external governance structures.
- The evaluators have successfully demonstrated the need and value that will be added by incorporating a targeted and strategic dose of external information to their evaluation.

In short, when evaluation stakeholders are motivated and insightful, there is a healthy amount of internal or external pressure driving the process, and the evaluation is directly impacted in a meaning-
ful way by the addition of external information, the EISF process is extremely effective.

BRIEF ILLUSTRATION

The best way to gain an appreciation for the utility of the EISF process is to briefly describe its application in a “real-world” setting. The authors applied this process when providing evaluative support to an outpatient mental health program that supports individuals with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders in the community.

This program had been operating for more than four decades and had never received the attention of a professional evaluator. The evaluation was focused on assessing the validity of the clinical protocols utilized by the program. The program management and clinical staff served as the evaluation stakeholders for this project. With few exceptions, all of these stakeholders were invested in locating external information about contemporary, evidence-informed clinical protocols to aid them in answering the evaluation questions related to the validity of their entrenched processes. It was their hope that this information would guide the program reformation that they and the authors were confident would need to occur to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of the program.

The authors began their search for external information by engaging the evaluation stakeholders in both query and search parameter development. This process was extremely fruitful as it established the boundaries of the search for external information. The search focused on information published in the past five years directly pertaining to the clinical population in question and the evidence-informed intervention techniques for this population. All extraneous information was eliminated from the external information search process. Determining the formatting process followed and was equally fruitful. The evaluation stakeholders determined that Level 6 formatting would be most useful once they were ready to proceed with the implementation of any necessary program changes. The rationale for this decision was that it would be easier to make piecemeal changes using contextualized, interpretive summaries for each of the queries that were developed. The ultimate outcome of this process was a series of highly intentional, focused documents that aided the program in a significant overhaul that led to more practical, empirically-supported support for individuals with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders living in the community.
CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, many evaluators have a story of a literature review gone awry. Whether it is due to the noted inefficiencies of the standard literature-searching process or to the guess work involved in the standard formatting process, anecdotes of night-long web surfing marathons and disappointed evaluation customers abound. The EISF process is a tool designed to put an end to all of this by involving the evaluation customer in key elements of the decision-making process. In doing so, the information searcher ensures that the customer’s informational needs are well met and the information is presented in a manner that is useful to them.

REFERENCES


Brian Marriott is an Evaluation Analyst with the Information Management, Evaluation, and Research (IMER) Unit within Mental Health and Addictions Services with Alberta Health Services in Calgary, Alberta.

Christopher Cameron is an Evaluation Manager within the Public Health Innovation and Decision Support (PHIDS) Unit with Alberta Health Services, and Director and Lead Consultant of Objective Research and Evaluation Inc. in Calgary, Alberta.