

# Contracting For Program Evaluation Resources

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The first theme with which I would like to deal is why departments do (and should) use consultants in evaluation projects. This is given fairly short shrift in the paper, but then ignored or, in fact, contradicted in the views expressed later. In this discussion, I will be putting forward the perspective of a large consulting firm in the Federal Government evaluation market. Such a firm has 5-10 full-time professionals in the evaluation area, and as a firm, has been carrying out evaluation work for 6-8 years.

What does such a firm offer to a program evaluation project? First of all, there is a wealth of experience in evaluation projects covering many of the areas of the government. This implies a significant understanding of evaluation issues and processes, and experience in applying various techniques and approaches to a litany of different programs. Most of this experience is *not* from one single type of task, such as carrying out a survey or doing a cost-benefit calculation. Rather, for such a firm, it is the knowledge gleaned from having executed over 100 multi-faceted evaluation studies over the last 6-8 years. To ignore the benefits of this experience, and pigeon-hole these consultants into narrowly-defined tasks, is to waste a tremendous resource.

The first place this wide experience and expertise should be utilized is in the evaluation assessment. While it is, of course, essential to have departmental staff involved in the assessment, excluding experienced evaluation consultants is ludicrous. Having wrestled with issue analysis and delineation through a wide variety of areas, they are able to complement the departmental staff with fresh views and "zero-base" questions which have never been posed. I also believe that exclusion of consultants from assessments has resulted in major defects in the proposed methodological approaches, designs, schedules, and costs. Many assessments have been weak (or just plain inaccurate) in these areas. Consultants have the experience, as part of their day-to-day work, to look at new and creative ways to address a variety of issues. Consultants also operate in a time and cost-dictated environment, and hence are particularly capable in contributing to realistic schedules and budgets.

Within a major consulting firm, a great deal of emphasis is placed on project management. This is often the key ingredient for success, and many a firm capable technically and in developing business, has collapsed because of deficiencies in this area. Project management is not something with which one is born; although not intellectually difficult, it does require attitudes, knowledge and infrastructure to carry out successfully. Major consulting firms, via intensive training and incentives, ensure attention is paid to this area. A major evaluation engagement requires careful project management; a department which gives out four consulting contracts as part of their evaluation, and then expects their own offices, without in-depth training or experience in project management, to pull off the schedule, costs and integration of results, is asking an awful lot. It is baffling to me to see a

comment like "private sector firms lack the expertise in the internal workings of complex programs necessary to effectively perform the project management." Evaluation consultants tend to be dedicated to work in the public sector, and have intensive experience with a variety of complex programs. They also have the training and experience in the fundamental operations of project management.

The section on Management of Consultants is a rather snide attack on the profession. The great majority of consultants are conscientious professionals, who realize that their daily bread directly depends on the quality of their work. I do not see in what way they require "rigorous control". What is required is continuous client communications and feedback, so the department is advised of problems, emerging conclusions, etc.; surprises are then avoided and the client's contribution is maintained. When it is stated that the department should be examining initial tabulations and checking regressions, it is not clear what is being implied. Are the data being made up? Is the consultant unable to understand the statistical results? A better way of presenting the appropriate client—consultant relationship is not one of control, but of jointly and professionally carrying out a piece of work.

Throughout the paper, and reiterated in the conclusion, is the view that success in an evaluation follows from dividing the study into pieces. I have, however, seen no evidence that this is true. I am aware of very good and very bad evaluations falling into both camps. Undoubtedly a large variable is the project management capability of the individual in charge. However, I believe it is still customary to underestimate the requirements of such project management, and more attention, in terms and training and focus, must be paid to this in the years to come.

Finally, probably my largest problem with the survey results is the lack of emphasis on evaluation "quality". Yes, an evaluation must be timely, relevant, and an asset to decision-making. However, it should also be "right". The results must be valid, reliable, etc. This implies a requirement for methodological expertise and rigour, lack of bias, and other qualities which professional evaluation consultants are well-suited to bring to an evaluation study. While a valid high-quality study that is not used has been a waste of money, a poor-quality study that is used is likely to be downright damaging. It is far from sufficient that evaluations be relevant, timely and used—they must also be correct. "Better used than right" is not the appropriate ideology for evaluations. I would like to see significantly more appreciation of this aspect of evaluation, and more awareness of what the consulting community can bring to it.

Related to this last point is the cost of proposal preparation. Unless Terms of Reference are rigidly detailed, consultants must spend a large amount of time learning about the program and related evaluation issues to prepare a suitable proposal. Much of this effort is independent of contract size. Splitting up a \$100,000 contract into four \$25,000 contracts greatly increases the overall cost to the industry, and decreases the "expected value" for a given company. There are two concerns here:

- proposals will diminish in quality
- good firms will not bid.

In the first case, a proposal generally determines the structure of the evaluation itself. A poor proposal will lead to issues not being addressed, inappropriate (or at least non-innovative) methodologies being used, and is greater chance of client-consultant disagreement in the course of the study as the proposal deficiencies manifest themselves. The second point, of good firms not involving themselves in particular evaluation studies, can already be seen. Requests for Proposals with large bidding lists and relatively low contract amounts are being ignored by firms well-equipped to do the job. Consulting firms are not all alike, and a given evaluation, depending on its size, methodological approach, issues, etc. is likely to be best handled by one of a small set of evaluation firms. If these firms do not see it being worthwhile to propose, the result will be a study of significantly lower quality.