A PEER SUPPORT APPROACH TO EVALUATION: ASSESSING SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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Abstract: This article describes a peer support approach to evaluating outcomes within supported employment programs for people with developmental disabilities. Based on a model developed with seven agencies, peer support evaluation draws on insights from both internal and external evaluation. Each of the components of peer support evaluation is outlined. A case study of one agency’s experience with peer support evaluation is described. The article concludes with several lessons drawn from implementation experience with several agencies, including the importance of training and support.

Résumé: Cet article décrit une approche de soutien par les pairs pour l’évaluation des résultats dans les programmes d’emploi subventionnés destinés aux personnes ayant des déficiences développementales. L’évaluation basée sur un modèle de soutien par les pairs mis au point par sept organismes utilise des connaissances tirées d’évaluation interne et externe. Chacune des composantes de ce type d’évaluation est indiquée et une étude de cas de l’expérience d’un organisme est décrite. L’article se termine par diverses leçons apprises de la mise en pratique dans divers organismes, y compris l’importance de la formation et du soutien.

Building evaluation capacity is an important goal for community service agencies (Love, 1993). Several writers have noted the role that evaluators play in helping organizations to build evaluation capacity. Stake (1986) argues that the evaluator helps people to discover ideas, answers, and solutions within their own minds. Lau and LeMahieu (1997) emphasize that evaluation assists in the
“construction of new knowledge within the project” (p. 13), and Mathison (1994) describes partnerships between evaluators and organizations that shift the role of the evaluator to that of educator.

Building the evaluation capacity within organizations means evaluators must be more than an aide to the decision maker. Evaluators’ overemphasis on meeting the needs of decision makers is often a fundamental flaw in evaluation. We agree with Guba and Lincoln (1989) that the involvement of stakeholders is a central part of evaluation and of building evaluation capacity. A number of approaches have been utilized to involve stakeholders and to enhance evaluation capacity, including participatory evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Papineau & Kiely, 1996a), participatory action research (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998; Sample, 1996), and fourth-generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Evaluation within the field of developmental disabilities is a relatively recent phenomenon. With government cutbacks and the growing emphasis on community involvement and integration for children and adults with developmental disabilities, there has been increased interest in accountability and evaluation (Burchard & Schaefer, 1992; Gardner, Nudler, & Chapman, 1997). In the area of supported employment, several studies have shown the positive impact that working in the community with support has on citizens with developmental disabilities (Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1997; McGaughey, 1989; Pedlar, Lord, & Van Loon, 1990). Studies also indicate that people with developmental disabilities are generally satisfied with their jobs in the community (Ochocka, Lord, & Roth, 1994; Test, Hinson, Solow, & Keul, 1993). Although segregated employment continues to be the norm in several jurisdictions, evidence suggests that integrated supported employment is increasing for people with developmental disabilities, in both Canada and the United States (Kiernan, Butterworth, & Mcgaughey, 1995; Pedlar, Lord, & Van Loon, 1990). At the same time, there have been calls for increasing the capacity of agencies to improve employment opportunities and outcomes (Mank, 1994).

BACKGROUND OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT EVALUATION PROJECT

We worked with seven supported employment agencies in southwestern Ontario over a two-year period to assist them in developing evaluation approaches in their work (Rush & Lord, 2000). In col-
laboration with a steering committee representing the organizations, we designed a three-step model that enabled the agencies to improve their own evaluation knowledge and skills. The three steps of the model are sequential and together create a comprehensive way by which organizations can evaluate their supported employment programs. Each step has a detailed process and set of activities for staff to carry out in order to complete the evaluation. The three steps are:

- standardized service indicators, which are gathered on an ongoing basis for each person who is being supported;
- satisfaction of service recipients, which can be gathered yearly or at intervals that work for the particular agency;
- evaluation of outcomes, utilizing a peer support approach.

As part of the process, we also concentrated strategies for developing a healthy evaluation culture within each agency (Community Involvement Council, 1997a). This involved training and supporting the organizations to involve people with disabilities and other stakeholders in the evaluation process. A complementary report focuses on step one and two (Rush & Lord, 2000).

This article will focus on the third step of the evaluation model. We shall describe each part of the peer support evaluation process, some of the dilemmas we faced in establishing the strategies we did, and lessons from the application of the outcomes evaluation with three supported employment agencies.

FRAMEWORK AND ASSUMPTIONS

Three assumptions guided the development of the peer support evaluation:

- outcomes as the focus,
- peer support as the organizing principle, and
- utilization and stakeholder involvement as the implementation approach.

The focus on outcomes was purposeful. Because the first two components of the model emphasize indicators, demographics, and satisfaction, outcomes served as the final and complementary evaluation component. Standardized outcome measures have been utilized in several developmental disabilities programs. Gardner and his col-
leagues (1997) identified seven factors and 30 personal outcomes that measure quality. O'Brien and Lyle (1988) developed the Frameworks for Accomplishments to help assess the quality of life of citizens with disabilities. Outcome evaluation tries to show that a positive change has occurred in people's lives and that the supported employment program can take some of the credit for it. In the assessment of outcomes, our primary concern was the impact of supported employment on the person being supported.

In measuring the quality of life of people with developmental disabilities, there is often a strong emphasis on values, specifically regarding independence and ability rather than disability. Although improved quality of life is an expected outcome of supported employment programs, we decided it was too broad a concept to serve as the only measure of outcome in our three-step evaluation model. The main concern was whether global measures of quality of life are sensitive enough to detect the changes in a person's life that result from support they have received in securing and maintaining employment. At issue is whether an improved employment situation will influence enough of the different dimensions of quality of life to be reflected in an overall quality-of-life score. It may not be possible to show positive outcomes through this overall score. In our project, we decided it makes more sense to think of employment as one vehicle by which people get connected to their community — connected socially, financially, and so on. What they gain from this connection is very individual and may require a more specific approach than one that can be captured with measures on overall quality of life.

In summary, we were concerned with outcomes that reflected the impact of supported employment on relevant dimensions of the quality of life of the person being supported, and that reflected the unique needs, aspirations, and life situation of each person being supported.

Peer support as the organizing principle for the outcome evaluation means peers from another organization provide support in the evaluation process. Our approach to peer support evaluation draws on insights from both internal and external evaluation. The perspective of people external to the program being evaluated brings more objectivity and credibility to evaluation activities. They also contribute much needed help to the organization being evaluated. People internal to that agency, on the other hand, help ground the assessment of outcomes in the experience and day-to-day reality of
the program. Peer support evaluation means that external and internal people work side by side as peer evaluators, with the focus being on learning. This distinguishes our system of peer support for evaluation from a system of peer review. Although we were unable to find any literature on peer support evaluation, we did locate literature on peer audits and self-evaluation (Braw, Sheldon, & Flaherty, 1995), which contains some of the elements that we have utilized.

The final part of our framework was utilization and stakeholder involvement, key elements in the implementation of the peer support evaluation. Utilization is a complex process whereby various stakeholders make use of evaluation information. The first step in utilization-focused evaluation “is identifying the primary intended users of the evaluation” (Patton, 1986, p. 43). The involvement of stakeholders and the utilization of evaluation results are consistent with the increased use of participatory action research and evaluation (Nelson et al., 1998; Papineau & Kiely, 1996b; Sample, 1996). Participatory action research works on the assumption that stakeholders will be engaged in the process of investigation and that the collection and analysis of information will be for the purpose of taking action and making change (Nelson et al., 1998). In our outcome evaluation, we involved consumers, staff, families, and board members in the evaluation process. Information that was generated was designed to inform agencies and programs about their supported employment programs and how they might be able to make changes.

METHODOLOGY

During the course of our work on this project, several documents were produced, and these have formed the basis of much of our article. As the primary researchers on the project, we found that our own experience and reflections were also significant to our learning.

We followed four major steps in preparing and writing this article:

1. We reviewed the manual we produced for the agencies to utilize in conducting their peer support evaluation and reviewed our field notes on the extent to which agencies followed the manual outline.
2. We reviewed the evaluation reports produced by the peer support evaluation teams and the written reflections of staff
who coordinated the evaluation process for three agencies who completed the peer support evaluation.

3. We used all this information, including field notes on our own experiences, during a series of meetings where we reflected on themes and issues. By the end of this dialogue phase, we had structured our writing around a conceptual framework, a case study of peer support evaluation, and lessons learned.

4. After completing a draft of the document, we asked three stakeholders who had played central roles in the evaluation process to read it. Their feedback was incorporated into the final work.

Each of these steps is consistent with contemporary social research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

COMPONENTS OF PEER SUPPORT EVALUATION

Evaluation Approach

We used two general peer support approaches to assessing the outcomes of supported employment. The first involved examining the degree to which the person met his or her goals. For example, if Harry had the goal of “making a good wage” as he entered a supported employment program, we might ask if this goal was met. We could then say it was a positive outcome if Harry met his goal (had a good wage) or was a negative outcome if Harry did not meet his goal (had no wage or a very poor wage). The second way the peer support teams assessed outcomes was more open ended. We looked at a larger picture than Harry’s goals. We explored what changed for Harry as a result of his involvement in supported employment. Again, these changes could be positive or negative. Some examples of positive changes might be, for at work, has a real wage for the first time and participates with co-workers; and for outside work, made a friend and plays on company baseball team. As will be outlined in more detail below, our approach combines these two methods. We were concerned with the individual’s goals as well as the broader impact of the person’s employment.

Peer support teams utilized a qualitative approach for gathering information, by describing the outcomes experienced by the person being supported from their perspective, and from the perspective of people in their network. A qualitative approach gathers informa-
tion from a small number of people but seeks to gain a rich description and deep understanding of each person's situation. Participants' feelings, attitudes, behaviours, and opinions are used to develop themes that help us to express this understanding. No attempt is made to generalize these themes to a larger group of people. The themes are valuable, however, in documenting and gaining insight into outcomes related to participation in a particular program.

Our project chose a qualitative approach for several reasons. We value the perspective of the people being supported and their networks, and we believe people's personal perspectives will give us rich insights into their experiences and outcomes. We realized that each workplace is unique, and that it is important to capture the context of each person's situation and experiences. We also wanted the evaluation process to be able to respond to the unexpected and be open to new insights and surprises.

For each person participating in the peer support evaluation, information was gathered in several ways, including reviewing the person's file and asking the person, a family member or significant other, and the support worker a few questions.

Qualitative Data Gathering

As with all outcome evaluations, our task with the peer support approach was to show that positive changes have occurred and that these can be attributed at least in part to the person's involvement in the program. To ensure that our qualitative approach was convincing, trustworthy, and usable, we decided it was essential to describe the involvement of a cross-section of people in their supported employment program (usually for four to six individuals within one organization). The peer support teams also used several sources of information in developing each person's story, and had two people gather the information to make sure it was accurate and that a shared interpretation was developed. They also spent enough time on each person's story to be sure sufficient information was obtained. This involved having different people carefully review all the information to identify a common understanding of the person and his or her involvement with supported employment.

The primary framework for gathering and analyzing the information provided a structure for carrying out the interviews, probing
for information, and analyzing the information for themes. There were four elements to this goal-oriented framework:

1. what the individual wanted from employment and employment support and the goals subsequently negotiated or planned with the support worker;
2. supports provided and relationship to goals;
3. outcomes obtained in relation to the goals as well as unanticipated outcomes (positive and negative); and
4. factors that help explain the level of progress towards the goals and the outcomes (i.e., key influences, attributions).

Using this framework, the analysis proceeded in two stages: first, focusing on each individual being supported, and second, looking across individuals to identify themes, lessons learned, and possible implications for service enhancement.

Peer Support Process

Our approach to the evaluation of the outcomes of supported employment involved one agency inviting outside peers to support them in the evaluation process. The role of these peer evaluators was to support the internal evaluation process rather than assume responsibility for it. Each evaluation team was made up of two external peers and two internal program representatives or evaluation stakeholders. Experience with the three agencies indicated positive benefits of balancing the team with managers and front-line staff. Our three projects showed that the internal people constantly identified context for the team. Their openness enabled ongoing discussion and fuller understanding of the context. On a practical level, the internal people were also able to quickly assess incomplete information in the files.

This blend of internal/external team members and managers/front-line staff is consistent with the principles of participatory, internal evaluation. Each team conducted its work on behalf of the agency’s evaluation committee. These committees, comprised of key stakeholders, including service recipients, helped stimulate evaluation activity and utilized materials being generated by this project.

Selecting the internal and external peer support evaluators was an important process. Having enthusiastic, competent people in these roles ensures that their involvement will contribute to a positive
learning situation for everyone. The following seemed to be crucial to team success: knowledge and experience with supported employment, experience or keen interest in evaluation, good listening and recording skills, basic keyboarding/wordprocessing skills, ability to work well collaboratively, no conflict of interest, an openness to learning, and motivation to be involved in the peer support evaluation.

The qualitative evaluation process described earlier formed the “steps” for the peer support teams to follow in their work. The manual that was part of the project provided more detailed strategies and techniques for teams to utilize. An external consultant spent some time at the beginning with each team, and was available during the peer support process for further consultation and support if required.

Relationship with the Agency Being Reviewed

When initiating the peer support process, a clear statement of roles and responsibilities of the various parties needs to be in place. Although the peer support process is grounded fundamentally in trust, a written statement clarifies the role of the agency, the role of the external peer support evaluators, and the shared responsibilities of the evaluation team. The agency roles and responsibilities covered in a memorandum of understanding include the following:

- Having an evaluation committee comprised of relevant stakeholders and linked to the agency’s decision-making process
- Providing opportunity for two staff or other stakeholders to participate on the peer support team, including a one-day training workshop
- Providing the opportunity for the peer support team to meet on-site at least once prior to the beginning of the more intensive phase of the data-gathering and analysis process
- Providing the review team with a list of all people participating in the supported employment service. In addition to the person’s name, it is essential that the following information be included in this list of people: gender, part-time/full-time, high support/fairly independent, and length of time with supported employment. This information is needed to help the evaluation team select a cross-section of people to be interviewed
- Ensuring that a phone is available to the evaluation team, as well as other physical arrangements and office needs
during the intensive week of evaluation, including making records available to the full evaluation team, as well as a private space to review them

Training and Support

Training of the peer support teams involved reviewing the manual and participating in a training workshop. We found that training was needed until a sufficient number of trained peer evaluators were available. We also found that ongoing support was needed throughout the process.

The training workshop involved presentation and group discussion of each section of the manual and some small amount of group work related to identifying employment-related outcomes. Topics covered included:

- Supported employment and the three-step evaluation model
- Peer support and outcome evaluation
- Ethical issues; confidentiality
- The qualitative approach to peer support evaluation
- Descriptions of individual people/employment situations
- Interviewing techniques
- Process for data collection and analysis
- Preparatory day
- Overview of the evaluation week
- Preparing for the interviews and review of files
- Conducting the interviews: interview guide
- Structure to guide note-taking
- Ending the interview
- Analysis and reporting for each individual
- Identifying themes across people
- Writing the report
- Fitting the data into a larger picture of evaluation findings from the other two steps

Day-to-Day Process of Evaluation

We found that it took six and a half days to complete all the planning, data gathering, analysis, interpretation, and report writing for the peer support evaluation for one agency. One day was a preparatory day, followed two or three weeks later by five consecutive
days of intensive data collection, analysis, and writing at the agency. A half-day feedback session with agency board and staff leaders was then provided within two to four weeks of completing the data collection and report.

CASE STUDY: PEER SUPPORT EVALUATION

When the County Supported Employment Agency decided to participate in the peer support evaluation, the director of services appointed a manager and a support worker to be part of the peer support team. Both staff had previously attended a two-day training event on evaluation that included a review of the supported employment outcomes manual (Community Involvement Council, 1997b). The agency soon learned that the two external team members assigned to the evaluation team were from two other agencies in the area. One person was a manager from an association for community living that provided supported employment. This person had been involved in a previous peer support team, and his experience was seen as vital to the team’s composition. The second external team member was a front-line worker from an employment agency. Although she had attended an evaluation workshop, this was to be her first evaluation.

The peer support evaluation team first met for a day with the project coordinator. Utilizing the supported employment manual, the team explored their experience and values related to employment and people with disabilities. There were some differences that first day, but a deep respect emerged for the differing viewpoints. A common understanding of the values and the task at hand was developed. The team divided into two subteams for the purposes of interviewing and preliminary analysis. Each subteam consisted of an internal and an external person, as well as a manager and a support worker. The other activity the team carried out that first pre-evaluation day was to review the entire process for the evaluation. One of the project consultants joined the team for the afternoon to assist the project coordinator with this task. The team found the qualitative data analysis was the most challenging aspect of preparation. The team also selected the five individuals that they were to study as part of the evaluation.

By the time the team met for their five-day peer support evaluation process, the supported employment agency had arranged for the interviews with each of the five people who had been chosen. Each of
these people had given permission for a family member (a friend in one case) and the supported employment worker also to be interviewed. On the first morning, the two subteams reviewed individual files and began to make notes related to the evaluation questions. For the next two days, interviews were conducted. Fortunately for the subteams, interviews related to each person could be clustered near each other. So, on the first day, both subteams were able to complete the three interviews for their first person. During breaks in interviewing, subteam members spent time comparing notes and cleaning up their notes from previous interviews. The subteams found the process worked very well with one person interviewing and the second member acting as the recorder.

On the afternoon of the third day, both subteams were ready to begin their analysis of the information they had gathered. At this point, a consultant with experience in qualitative analysis joined the team for half a day. The process involved identifying patterns for each participant based on the four sources of information (files and interviews with the person, with family, and with the support worker). Once patterns were identified for each person, the two subteams met to compare their patterns and identify themes that were common across participants as well as themes unique to one or two participants. Team members found this work very difficult, and appreciated the support of the research consultant.

On the final day, the team began early to write their final report. The experienced manager began by framing an introduction. Using their themes to guide them, the team then identified quotes and examples to support each common theme. Examples of outcome themes included “developing relationships through work” and “increased independence.” In one case, a theme of “family support” was unique to one person who was employed in his brother’s business. The team spent its final afternoon developing recommendations for the agency being evaluated. One team member agreed to take the draft report home and do a final edit before sending it to the agency.

Three weeks later the entire team presented the report to a joint committee of the board and evaluation committee. This was a lively discussion that led to the evaluation committee agreeing to follow up on three major points that had emerged from the evaluation. The three points were: the need to improve files related to documentation of goals and outcomes, the benefits of doing more person-centred planning with individuals and families, and the need to be
more conscious of building natural supports within the workplace. One of the peer support team members described the session with the agency committee as a good fit with the spirit of peer support evaluation.

IMPLEMENTATION: LESSONS LEARNED

Based on the completion of three peer support evaluations, we have identified several lessons related to the implementation of this type of peer support evaluation process.

The Importance of Training

We learned that specific pre-training was crucial to the success of the week-long peer support evaluation process. At one of the sites, the pre-day training and preparation could not be carried out. This team took much longer to sort out their values and differences and always seemed to be playing “catch-up.” People who agreed to participate as peers were not trained as evaluators and therefore needed a workshop to ground them in the philosophy and the approach. The pre-training day familiarizes the peer evaluators with the manual, which is an essential tool in the peer support process. Participants appreciated the manual and the step-by-step approach to peer evaluation. As other researchers have found, however, we learned that manuals by themselves are less effective than when they are combined with “hands-on” practical training and support (Braw, Sheldon, & Flaherty, 1995).

The Importance of Ongoing Consultation Support

We also found that ongoing consultation was essential. During the three peer support projects, we gradually reduced the amount of consultation support we provided. This was augmented by ensuring that each new peer support evaluation involved one or two peers who had previously experienced the process. Nevertheless, feedback from peer evaluators suggested there is value in providing ongoing consultation. For example, the agencies appreciated the peer support process, but found that the reports provided by the peer support teams could have been more comprehensive. Although few peer support team members had writing experience, we were impressed with their ability to develop themes from qualitative information. What was more difficult for the teams was translating qualitative
themes into detailed analysis and presentation. We also found ongoing consultation to be important in the early stages when teams needed support to be focused, and for the consultant to be a “sounding board” during the data analysis process. The external consultant also played a key role in the training days, not just in terms of the evaluation but also for team building.

The Importance of Building Relationships

This project, like most social change interventions, requires that strong relationships be built among the main players. The external and internal peer evaluators, for example, need time to get to know and trust each other. Evaluations are often difficult for organizations, and the staff leaders must feel confident that this process will be useful for their agency. It may take time, several conversations, and some relationship building for people to feel comfortable in proceeding. We found that if attention has been paid to building the evaluation culture, then participation will be more readily accepted (Rush & Lord, 2000). When evaluation is well accepted in an agency, then there is more openness to outside people coming into the setting.

Importance of Stories in Understanding Outcomes

We learned that stories are a useful way to understand outcomes. The four or five stories gathered in each of the pilots provided rich, in-depth perspectives on people’s experiences. Our qualitative approach meant that individual stories presented a tapestry of perspectives. The person’s own voice was central, but was augmented by the voices of the family and support worker. Together, these voices helped the evaluators reflect on outcomes as well as the attributions or reasons for the particular outcomes. Our approach gave depth to attributions.

Unexpected Spin-Offs from the Process

We found some interesting, unexpected spin-offs from the peer support evaluation process. In two of the organizations, the evaluation culture was definitely enhanced by this work. Evaluation committees of the agencies learned more about outcome evaluation, and experienced for the first time a collaborative evaluation approach focused on learning, not judgement. The peer evaluators themselves
commented several months later on the value of such processes for their personal and professional growth.

CONCLUSION

Our pilot project on peer support evaluation developed a set of strategies to assist supported employment organizations to assess outcomes of their projects. This peer support approach is embedded in a philosophy that honours learning, peer connections, and stories. Although the approach utilized may seem quite different from more traditional evaluation approaches, the rigorous process reflects principles of effective research and evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The approach is also consistent with organizations building strong internal evaluation capacity (Love, 1991).

This work points to the usefulness of peer support evaluation, although our experience is that it probably should not stand alone as an evaluation activity. Rather, it makes more sense for peer support outcome evaluation to be part of a more comprehensive approach to evaluation. This peer support work was part of a larger project that recommended that agencies first establish standardized indicators and descriptive information data gathering for supported employment, and then study the satisfaction of consumers at regular intervals. Peer support evaluation “fits” within such a framework by deepening the understanding of issues and ideas. In our project, qualitative research allowed stories of individuals to illustrate how lived experience can inform policy and practice. When qualitative outcome evaluation is combined with day-to-day information concerning a program and consumer satisfaction, it has the potential to make a very useful contribution to the work of the organization.

REFERENCES


