

Evaluation in the Provinces and Territories – Saskatchewan

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This paper is part of a scan across Canada to determine the demand for and use of systematic evaluation by provincial and territorial governments. The information cited in this article is gleaned from evidence gathered during thirty years of policy and evaluation work with the Saskatchewan government, including group and individual discussions with individuals working in strategic planning across government.

Current Situation

Systematic program evaluation is sporadic across the Saskatchewan provincial government, existing within a small number of ministries – of the 19 ministries listed on the government website five have units with the term “evaluation” in their title. Formal evaluation varies according to the ministry and the evaluation experience of the individuals working in the ministry. If it exists in any form, it generally responds to a need for fiscal accountability for an individual program, measures performance and is generally output based.

The Saskatchewan government views evaluation as a function that describes any type of assessment undertaken to ensure accountability. The Office of Planning, Performance and Improvement within the Ministry of Finance has implemented an organizational planning process across government, the Planning and Accountability Management System. Ministries must adopt this system which includes pieces of evaluation methodology, but there is no formal corporate policy that requires evaluation as part of program development and implementation.

Until recently the overall focus of the Saskatchewan government was on continuous improvement through the use of Lean methodology and program review. Lean, introduced in 2010, focuses on program processes to improve program efficiency even if the program is not producing its intended outcomes; program review, adopted in 2012, assesses program alignment within government, relevance and effectiveness and may be described as a program evaluability assessment. The focus on individual program reviews and Lean may interfere with the systems approach needed to better meet client needs across programs. Ministry resources – financial and personnel – previously available for program evaluations have been redirected into program review and Lean.

Saskatchewan continues to experience demand, supply and budget challenges. Demand for formal program evaluation and skilled evaluators is low. The general premise of government is that evaluation can be done by anyone and does not require specific competencies. Traditional program evaluation is not a nimble tool and does not meet the need of central government to make decisions quickly. Program evaluation processes that should provide the context for all improvement and accountability work is a low priority. Where program evaluations continue to be undertaken, due to financial and time constraints, they are not always rigorous and are often post-implementation studies that rely on quantitative data and output information.

Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities

Looking forward, the Saskatchewan government has the opportunity to incorporate formal program evaluation as an umbrella for practices within its structured organizational planning system. As non-profits in Saskatchewan move toward an evaluation mind-set, partly because they are required to produce evidence of value for their funding, the government needs to take advantage of the opportunity to build its evaluation culture and advance its evaluative agenda.

The focus on continuous improvement and the innovative nature of the transformative agenda could raise program evaluation to new heights – to challenge perceptions and encourage evaluative thinking. It is important to demonstrate that restraint does not mean eliminating effectiveness and efficiency studies. It makes them more important to enable reflective, informed decision making about how programs can make things better and how resources can be used to make a difference.

As well, evaluators in Saskatchewan must adopt changes that will enable formal evaluation methodology to meet the needs of government that wants answers now. It will be interesting to observe the role program evaluation plays in the Saskatchewan government's innovation and transformation agenda.