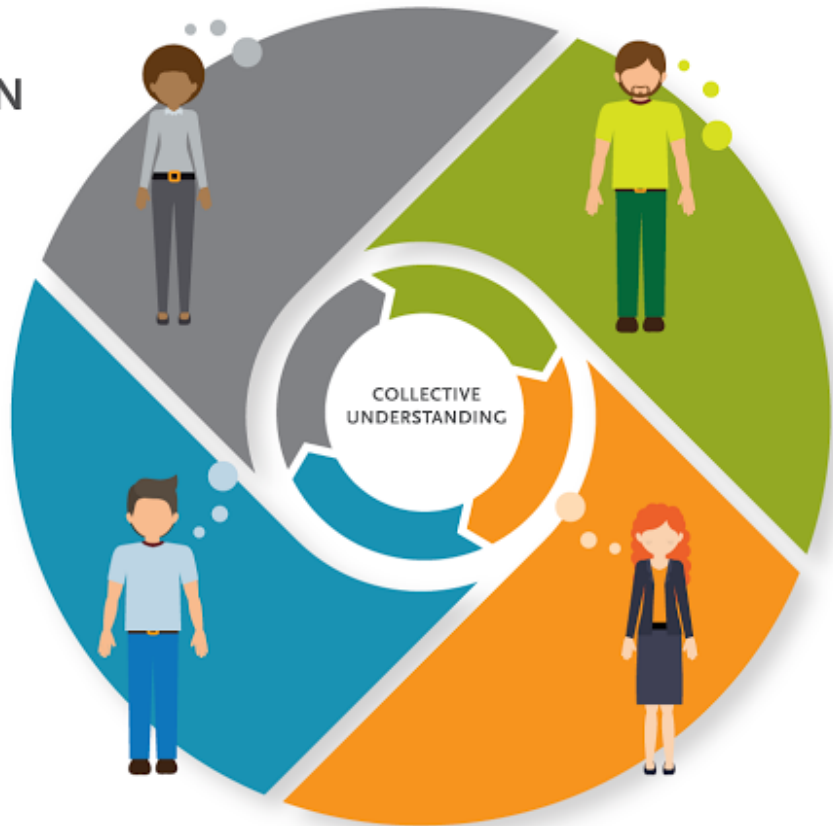


SECTOR DRIVEN EVALUATION STRATEGY

Sharing perspectives
=
Better evaluation



Evaluation Report — Executive Summary

January 2016 | Ontario Nonprofit Network

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The Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) is developing a [Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy](#) to empower nonprofits to become more actively involved in setting the evaluation agenda. We have noticed that much of the discussion around improving evaluation focuses on methodology, tools, and indicators. There has been less focus on who is asking and determining the questions of evaluation, such as who is an evaluation for and what is its purpose. We are interested in looking at the relationship between evaluation practice and the overall structure and function of the nonprofit sector in Ontario — things like the policies and regulations that guide us, the roles played by various actors, the assumptions we make, the language we use, and the ways in which resources move through the sector. We are interested in the purposes that evaluation serves, both overt and implicit. We want to learn more about the factors that make evaluations useful, the issues that can get in the way of this, and ideas for improvement. This executive summary is a companion piece to our full report, which is intended to generate a broad vision to inform our project's final product(s).

At its ideal, evaluation can help a nonprofit make sense of what it does and how it does it. It provides an opportunity to engage with all stakeholders, reflect on both failures and successes, and learn from them in order to make evidence-based decisions. It serves the ultimate purpose of contributing to a nonprofit's mission to better its community. In the nonprofit sector, the term *evaluation* is used to cover a wide range of social research activities, undertaken by different stakeholder groups.

Making evaluation useful

The factors that influence evaluation use can be divided into three categories: contextual factors; human and relationship factors; and evaluation factors. Moreover, of those categories, research suggests that the human and relationship factors are the most influential in determining if an evaluation is used.¹

¹ Patton 2008; Mayhew 2011

Factors that predict whether evaluation will be used

<i>Contextual factors</i>	<i>Human & relationship factors</i>	<i>Evaluation factors</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● money and resources ● program stability ● skill and experience of program staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● skill and experience of evaluators ● commitment to translate the evaluation into action ● engagement and commitment among intended users of the evaluation ● trust and rapport between stakeholder groups involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● user involvement in evaluation design ● relevance and usefulness of evaluation questions ● communication that is timely, transparent, honest, credible, and inclusive of all important stakeholders

Obstacles to use

Though there are many examples of useful evaluation in Ontario’s nonprofit sector, many feel that evaluation does not lead to action as often as it should. When evaluation is a top-down exercise it can result in “cynical compliance” and “secret resistance” attitudes to build in nonprofit organizations whereby “people carry on working according to their own professional judgement, while still reporting up the system what they perceive to be ridiculous numbers.”² However, when the evaluation agenda is shared among stakeholders and different perspectives are considered, important factors such as context, relationships, expertise, and resources become more apparent. A few key obstacles to use are highlighted below.

A focus on accountability

When nonprofits express frustration with evaluation, they tend to focus on situations in which an external funder requires evaluation work as a means of holding the nonprofit accountable or as a means to collect information from local sites in order to address systems-level evaluation questions. When the focus is on accountability, it can be difficult to share the kinds of findings that lead to learning and to new action.

A mismatch between approach and expectations

When an evaluation project uses an approach that is not a good fit with its purpose, that evaluation is less likely to lead to action. The table below summarizes the best uses of four types of evaluation-related work.

² Eyben 2013, 13

Approach	Works Well For...	Not So Good For...
<p>Performance measurement involves ongoing day-to-day tracking of basic information using less intrusive methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● making program management decisions, providing descriptive information to funders, engaging program staff (especially when based on a deep understanding of local context and extensive field testing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● measuring impact, adapting program design, or engaging stakeholders.
<p>Program evaluation involves building a theory of change, gathering data in a more intensive way, and generating recommendations for action.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● measuring individual program impact, adapting program design, or engaging local stakeholders (especially when it addresses questions that matter to stakeholders and has sufficient resources to ensure action takes place). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● making day-to-day program management decisions, demonstrating long term impact, evaluating complex interventions.
<p>Systems evaluation involves bringing together many kinds of data from different programs and sites in order to demonstrate their cumulative effect.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● revising policies or funding streams, engaging taxpayers or donors (especially when it includes good communication between stakeholders, supports local data collection, and includes access to expertise in complex data analysis). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● generating timely recommendations for local service providers. ● understanding the nuances of local context.
<p>Applied research involves more complex, time consuming methods and is designed to generate generalizable new knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● identifying best practices and demonstrating long term impact (especially when it addresses questions that matter to practitioners and communicates findings in an accessible way). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● generating practical recommendations for service providers.

A mismatch between investments and expectations

Evaluation work is often not resourced well enough to meet expectations. The four approaches described in the table above are organized in order of increasing complexity. Each row requires more time, more specialized expertise, and more money than the row above. Evaluation is less likely to be used when there is a mismatch between investment and expectations.

Inadequate communication

Utilization of evaluation is more likely when there is ongoing communication with key stakeholders throughout the process. Trust and collaboration are especially important when the evaluation is complex or the risks for stakeholder groups are high. In Ontario's nonprofit sector, information about evaluation often flows from the individual agency to the funder. Sharing of evaluation findings with agencies or between funders is uncommon and is rare with service users.

An overly narrow focus

An evaluation that gets used is an evaluation that answers questions that matter to those who are in a position to take action. Accountability-focused evaluation often addresses a narrow range of questions that are not very useful to nonprofits.

Promoting usefulness

The current system of evaluation is flawed. However, it should be possible to set up an evaluation system that produces useful evaluation work that meets the expectations of funders. Below are a number of ideas which have been raised in various contexts:

- Clarifying the focus of evaluation work through approaches like collective impact and strategic philanthropy.
- Re-thinking the role of evaluation in accountability relationships, in order to make more room for learning, sharing mistakes, and translating findings into action.
- Promoting critical reflection on evaluation work, in order to make sure that evaluation leads to action.
- Promoting the use of evaluation findings at the policy level, so that evaluation has greater value and systems planning can become more evidence based.
- Building capacity to negotiate evaluation agreements, so that nonprofits and other stakeholder groups can agree on evaluation approaches that will lead to action.
- Simplifying the evaluation process, so that it is less jargon-laden, less expensive, and less intimidating.
- Expanding the methodological toolbox to include more opportunities for stakeholder engagement, more qualitative methods, and more channels for learning and action to occur.

An emerging vision for a Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy

ONN's Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy is meant to resonate with nonprofit organizations across Ontario regardless of mission or size. Consequently, it will be important for the strategy to clearly distinguish the most appropriate uses of performance measurement, program evaluation, systems evaluation, and applied research. At the same time, it may also be intended to help integrate and apply the

lessons learned through many different evaluation projects undertaken by different people for different reasons. Perhaps even more crucially, the strategy needs to ensure that service users and community members are involved in setting the evaluation agenda.

Final thoughts

Our evaluation literature review serves as a first step toward developing a Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy. Many kinds of measurement work are undertaken in the sector. Becoming more informed about the relative strengths and limitations of applied research, performance measurement, program evaluation, and systems evaluation is one simple, but important way of setting the stage for evaluation use. This will help us to more quickly diagnose situations where expectations and strategies are misaligned. There are other important changes in perspective that have the potential to be very helpful. For example, re-orienting evaluation practice to put engagement and relationship building at the centre of the process would be a powerful step.

Going forward, we are beginning to envision what a strategy for evaluation in the nonprofit sector in Ontario could look like. Yet, we also recognize that it is only through further engagement with the sector that we will be able to move past some of the issues we've raised here and begin to shift the perspective about what evaluation can and should be.

In that sense, for us to achieve our goals, we will need your help and we invite you to get in touch and provide us with your feedback. Help us develop a Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy and make evaluation less about paperwork and more about insight.

We want to hear from you!

Give us your feedback on this report: <https://theonn.wufoo.com/forms/evaluation-literature-review-feedback/>

For more information, visit: <http://theonn.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation/>

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To read the full report: http://theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Report_ONN-Evaluation-Literature-Review_2016-01-21.pdf

About ONN

Organized in 2007 and incorporated as a nonprofit in 2014, the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) is the convening network for the approximately 55,000 nonprofit and charitable organizations across Ontario. As a 7,000-strong provincial network, with a volunteer base of 300 sector leaders, ONN brings the diverse voices of the sector to government, funders and the business sector to create and influence systemic change. ONN activates its volunteer base and the network to develop and analyze policy, and work on strategic issues through its working groups, engagement of nonprofits and charities and government.

Our Vision

A Strong and Resilient Nonprofit Sector. Thriving Communities. A Dynamic Province.

Our Mission

To engage, advocate, and lead with—and for—nonprofit and charitable organizations that work for the public benefit in Ontario.

Our Values

Courage to take risks and do things differently.

Diversity of perspectives, **creativity** and **expertise** to get stuff done.

Optimism and **determination**.

Solutions created by the sector, with the sector, for the sector.

Celebrating our successes and **learning** from our experiences.

Strength that comes from working **together**.

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