

Environmental Scan of Evaluation Capacity in Alberta

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**An Initiative of the Canadian Evaluation Society Alberta and
Northwest Territory Chapter in Partnership with
Alberta Innovates – Health Solutions**

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Executive Summary

Project Purpose

This evaluation scan was undertaken by the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) Alberta and Northwest Territories (NWT) Chapter in partnership with Alberta Innovates – Health Solutions to advance advocacy for evaluation in Alberta. The purpose of the overall project (Phases 1-4) is (i) to understand, at a high level, the evaluation needs of evaluators, funders of evaluations and decision makers who use evaluation results, and (ii) to understand the capacity for evaluation with respect to individuals, organizations, and systems (i.e., networks, sectors).

Between July and October 2014, the pre-phase analysis and Phase 1 of the environmental scan was initiated. The findings presented in this report are gleaned from both the pre-phase and Phase 1, to provide a **preliminary, high-level overview** of Alberta’s enabling environment and organizational-level evaluation capacity based on the perceptions of those responsible for conducting, commissioning, funding, and/or using evaluation results.

Methods

A pre-phase situational analysis was conducted to engage project stakeholders, to identify their priorities for the project, as well as to inform the evaluation questions, design and methodology. Phase 1 consisted of fifteen semi-structured interviews with key informants from Government, Public Organizations, and Private Industry focusing on Health, Research and Innovation in Alberta. Mixed methods analyses of the results were conducted and the findings organized according to the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) model.

Evaluation Questions

The following questions were examined in Phase 1.

Examination of Organizational Needs

How are organizational evaluation activities focused in terms of purpose and type?
What tools or resources are being used?

Examination of Organizational Capacity

What is working?: Strengths, Opportunities
What should be improved?: Weaknesses and Threats
What is the current state of evaluation in Alberta¹?

Strengthening the Evaluation Ecosystem

How should evaluation advocacy efforts proceed based on the findings?

¹ Evaluation capacity in the Northwest Territories was not explored due to project timelines and recruitment limitations; efforts to engage and sample interview participants from the Northwest Territories were not successful.

Key Results

The purpose of this section is to present an aggregate, overall summary of the data collected during Phase 1 of the Environmental Scan. It is not intended to describe the specific characteristics or state of evaluation capacity of the individual organizations that participated in the interviews. By presenting the results in aggregate, early appreciation of the state of evaluation capacity at the provincial level can begin to be understood, although it is important to emphasize these results represent the initial findings of a multi-phase environmental scan.

Examination of Organizational Needs

The organizations represented in this scan undertake evaluations primarily for accountability and learning/analysis purposes, and also for allocation and advocacy. Regardless of an organization's purpose for evaluation, common needs in relation to evaluation capacity were identified among the majority of those interviewed. These needs included:

- better data access and addressing limitations to information sharing,
- mechanisms to draw from, and contribute to, a central pool of evaluation tools and resources, and
- more opportunities to network, connect and learn from others.

The preliminary results suggest there is a need to focus evaluation capacity building efforts in the area of accountability and to advocate for the value of evaluation in informing decision-making. Emerging areas of interest for commissioners of evaluation included complex, comprehensive, and systematic evaluation approaches, including return on investments assessments and efficiency analyses (i.e., optimizing processes and products to be efficient and cost effective). The early results also suggest a number of organizations are interested in increasing organizational capacity in these areas. However, for organizations in the developmental stage of evaluation capacity, gaps in human resources and the stage of maturity of the enabling environment may present challenges to fully realizing these evaluation goals.

Gaps: Overall

Reportedly, the greatest gaps in organizational evaluation capacity occur in the area of Human Resources and include:

- inadequate staffing,
- technical² skills of evaluators (e.g., strategic, systematic), and/or specialized skills (e.g., economic evaluations, impact analysis) to meet the needs of those commissioning evaluations,
- limited opportunities and/or support for professional development in evaluation, and
- paucity of exemplary organizational leadership³ that supports a culture of evaluation.

² In terms of the specialized aspects of evaluation, such as design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting.

Of note, the adoption and uptake of systematic, comprehensive evaluation into practice was identified as a challenge and opportunity among all participating organizations.

Examination of Capacity (Preliminary SWOT Results)

Strengths

In relation to evaluation capacity, areas of organizational strengths include:

- organizational cultures that are learning oriented and encourage staff participation, engagement, and reflection in evaluation, and
- organizations with supportive senior managers and knowledgeable, competent evaluation staff.

Further, organizational representatives identified opportunities to access networks⁴, and collaborations, and integration of evaluation activities into organizational systems and processes, along dedicated staffing for evaluation as additional strengths of the current state of evaluation capacity.

Weaknesses

Consistent with the literature, the interviewees indicated weaknesses in their organizations related to formal evaluation training and the absence of evaluation champions or leaders who support the ability to **do** and **use** evaluations. Weaknesses identified across sectors also included:

- weak integration of evaluation into organizational systems and processes (e.g., because of poor data collection or lack of quality or credible information to inform decision making),
- low level of maturity⁵ of the evaluation culture and social norms related to evaluation,
- inequity in capacity and resources between and among some organizations, organizational units or portfolios,
- difficulty establishing evaluation-related collaborations, both internally and externally (for both management and evaluators),
- undefined or poorly defined evaluation objectives and priorities, and poor project planning at the onset, and
- separation of senior managers or decision makers from evaluation activity.

³ As defined by Bourgeois and Cousins, 2013: “an individual with strong evaluation and management background [who] reconciles expectations of senior management with operational requirements and resources of team, [who] guides, mentors and coaches team members as part of his/her regular duties.

⁴ Systems of relatively autonomous evaluation stakeholders that are working in concert to achieve shared goals or pursuing individual goals within a shared evaluation-related system.

⁵ Evaluations performed in organizations can be defined by considering three basic levels of maturity. The first level includes the conscious use of skilled evaluation, typically in the form of quality assurance methods or performance measurement systems. Level two supplements the organization’s internal evaluation efforts with external evaluators or auditors providing an independent review. The third level of maturity is achieved with the internalization of the evaluative attitude throughout the organization as demonstrated by the organization’s structure, policies, rewards, and actions (Martz, 2013).

Opportunities

Two areas identified as opportunities for further growth and development in organizations in all sectors interviewed were increased socialization of the evaluation profession and formalizing (e.g., through principled, systematic design and frameworks) evaluation into practice. Other opportunities to advance organizational evaluation capacity included:

- providing mechanisms to support staff interaction, results sharing and professional development,
- promotion of internal or external evaluation activities and implementation of best-practice approaches (i.e., frameworks) to guide practice and application, and
- provision of opportunities to encourage acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of **the value of evaluation**.

Threats

Phase 1 of the project identified threats to strengthening evaluation capacity in Alberta that align with threats identified elsewhere in the literature. These threats pertain to the enabling environment for evaluation, and include:

- for external evaluators, the apparent trend toward provincial organizations using more internal resources for evaluation which may affect the rates of external evaluation consultant/contract work,
- lack of clearly defined evaluation strategies and/or plans in organizations,
- differing perceptions of the value and expectations of evaluation (between those who commission, produce and/or use evaluation results for decision-making), and
- in some organizations, under-qualified individuals in evaluation positions where organizational evaluation outcome expectations may exceed professional evaluation skills.

Key Messages

Strengthening the Evaluation Ecosystem

Consistent with previous provincial and national findings, the areas where the greatest benefit to capacity building may be realized is in the provision of:

- more formal evaluation training opportunities at intermediate and advanced levels,
- enhanced leadership within organizations and communities of practice,
- championing of evaluation cultures within and between organizations, and
- collaboration and creation of communities of practice within and across sectors and focus areas to increase awareness of evaluation activity and value, and to address barriers to enhancing evaluation capacity.

Taken together, these *preliminary findings* suggest a promising future for the evaluation profession, as the early results appear to reinforce the need for evaluation services to inform decision makers and meet accountability requirements. Further, these early results identify growth and development opportunities for the Alberta evaluation community. While traditional evaluation approaches and skills are still

needed and some degree of capacity is currently present in the province, further growth in complex, real-world approaches to evaluation is required. This includes systematic, comprehensive and strategic evaluations as well as opportunities to connect and engage evaluators and those who benefit from their work. Despite the room for growth, it is a promising work in progress.

Summary & Next Steps

As a result of stakeholder engagement throughout the environmental scan, it became apparent greater awareness of evaluation activity within the province was necessary to benefit from the experiences of others and reduce duplication of efforts for those seeking to understand and improve evaluation capacity in the province. Throughout the project, all stakeholders indicated interest in having access to mechanisms to share information and leverage tools, systems and resources to move evaluation practice forward. The extent to which the project's preliminary Phase 1 results represent the population of all evaluation stakeholders in Alberta requires further investigation. The potential benefits that could result from such an assessment warrant further investigation and the dedication of resources.