Evaluation Practices in Canadian Voluntary Organizations

Most nonprofit and voluntary organizations evaluate their programs and services. However, expectations regarding evaluation are increasing and many organizations are facing challenges. To understand the evaluation capacity of voluntary organizations in Canada, telephone surveys of 1,965 voluntary organizations and 322 funders were conducted in 2001, as part of the Voluntary Sector Evaluation Research Project (VSERP).

Increasing Expectations

The survey showed that funders' evaluation expectations had increased over the past three years. Government funders were more likely to report increased expectations than were foundations. Both types of funders were reported to be requiring more information on outcomes (see Figure 1).

Funder Support For Evaluation

Despite increased expectations, less than half (47%) of funders provided funding for evaluation activities or allowed project funding to be used for evaluation. The most frequently reported support provided by funders was advice on evaluation (73% of government funders and 48% of foundations). In general, government funders were more likely than foundations to provide evaluation support (see Figure 2).

Performing Evaluation

More than three quarters (77%) of voluntary organizations reported that they had conducted some types of evaluation over the past year. Among them, almost three quarters (73%) performed evaluation routinely and for internal reasons. Three quarters (75%) reported that their own staff were responsible for conducting the evaluation.[1] Organizations were most likely to evaluate their ongoing programs and services (66%) (see Figure 3).

Types of Evaluation Information Collected

Voluntary organizations reported that they collected evaluation information on outputs (76%), outcomes (66%), user satisfaction (65%), and financial costs (54%).

We were surprised that 66% of organizations said they collected information on outcomes, because this type of information is difficult to collect and measure. To probe this issue, we asked these organizations to indicate how difficult the process of outcome evaluation was.

Figure 1. Percentage of Organizations Reporting Increase in Funder Evaluation Expectations Over Past Three Years – by Funder Type
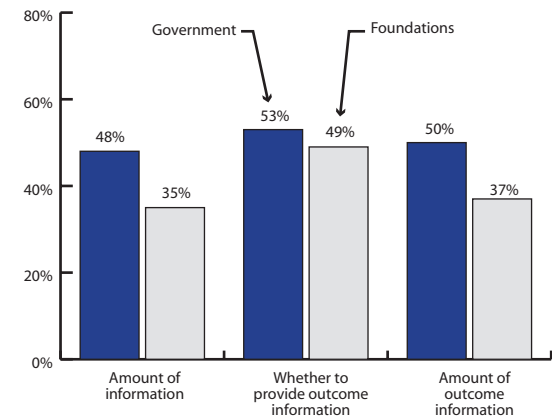

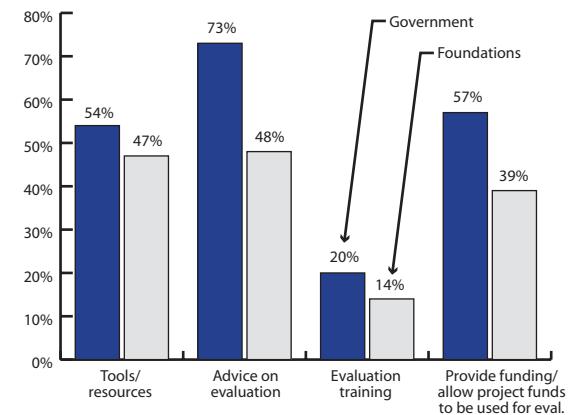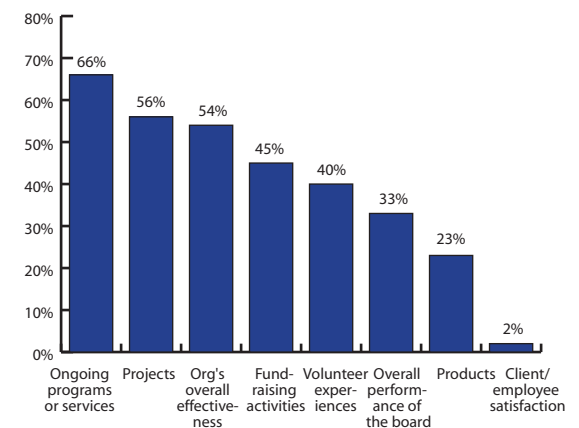Figure 2. Percentage of Funders that Provide Evaluation Support – by Funder Type

Figure 3. What Was Evaluated in the Past Year

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[1] Only 8% reported using external evaluators for conducting evaluation and 15% reported using volunteers.

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Surprisingly, close to three quarters (73%) said outcome data collection was easy, 70% said identifying outcome measures was easy, and 79% reported that interpreting results was easy.

Post-survey interviews with a number of organizations revealed that there is confusion between "outcomes" and "outputs." These organizations, in practice, had collected output information but interpreted and reported it as outcome information. This confusion could result in frustration and miscommunication among the funders who increasingly search for outcome information and the voluntary organizations that put efforts into providing the evaluation information that is not required primarily.

Using Evaluation Information

More than seven in ten voluntary organizations (73%) reported that they used evaluation information effectively or very effectively. In comparison, less than half (47%) of funders said they used this information effectively or very effectively. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that 36% of funders said they received evaluation information that was not what they had expected. Also, 26% of funders said they lacked the internal capacity – time and resources – to review the information. Funders were also less satisfied (76%) than organizations (95%) with the evaluation (see Figure 4).

Board Involvement

The survey showed that a healthy level of board involvement may increase the effective use of the evaluation information. More than half (52%) of organizations whose boards were involved in evaluation reported that they used evaluation information very effectively. By contrast, less than one fifth (19%) of organizations whose boards had no involvement reported very effective use of this information.

Almost seven in ten (68%) voluntary organizations reported that their board either reviewed, or requested and reviewed the evaluation information. Eight percent said their board had only requested this information, and 20% reported no board involvement at all.

Barriers

Both voluntary organizations and funders agreed that lack of internal capacity such as staff or time, lack of money, unclear funder expectations, and lack of skills and knowledge were the main barriers to evaluation for voluntary organizations. Funders were more likely to report these as barriers (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Percentage of Organizations Satisfied with Evaluation and Percentage Reporting Effective Use of Evaluation Information
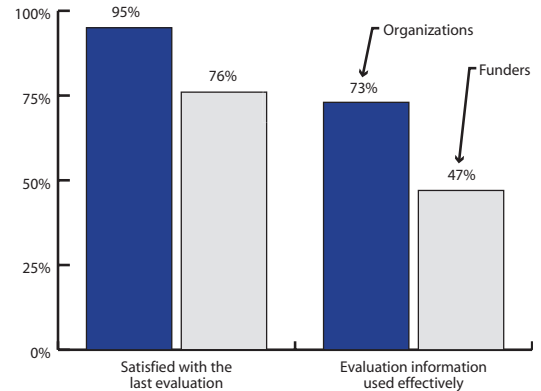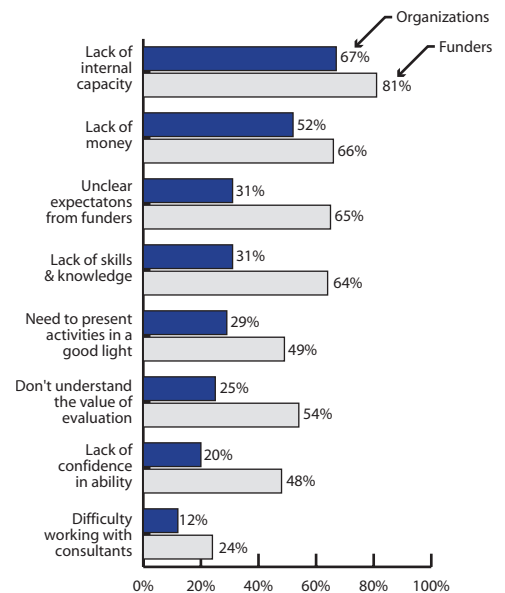

Figure 5. Percentage of Organizations and Funders Reporting Barriers for Evaluation

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