



Evidence Summary

Web-Based Portal for Impact Evaluation Reveals Information Needs for Museums, Libraries and Archives

A review of:

Williams, Dorothy A., Caroline Wavell, Graeme Baxter, Alan MacLennan, and Debbie Jobson. "Implementing Impact Evaluation in Professional Practice: A Study of Support Needs Within the Museum, Archive and Library Sector." International Journal of Information Management 25.6 (Dec. 2005): 533-48.

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Abstract

Objective – This study reports on research into the information and support needs of practitioners in the museum, archive, and library sectors, who are undergoing an impact evaluation.

Design – Qualitative survey.

Setting – Web-based questionnaire.

Subjects – Twenty-one practitioners in the fields of museums, archives, and libraries.

Methods – The study made use of a small-scale web portal that provides impact evaluation research findings, toolkits, and

examples of methods. The portal's intent was to present to the users multiple views of the available information in order to overcome the problem of users not being able to identify their needs. A purposive sample group consisting of 50 practitioners from the museum, library, and archive fields was invited to participate in a questionnaire evaluating the website.

Main Results – Despite a fairly low response rate (49%) and poor distribution among the three sectors (museums, libraries, and archives), the results indicated a significant difference in the levels of knowledge and understanding of impact evaluation. Over half of the organizations surveyed had done some assessment of their

institution's economic impact, and there appears to be a rising trend towards doing impact studies for specific projects and developments. Nearly a quarter of the organizations had not undertaken any impact evaluation study previously. Practitioners already familiar with impact evaluation tended to look at broader range of fields for expertise, whereas those with less familiarity remained within their own sector. Practitioners with less experience preferred tools, guidance, and examples of methodologies as opposed to actual evidence of impact. The results also provided the authors with feedback on their web portal and how to organize the information therein.

Conclusions – One of the findings of the study was that the overall reaction to impact evaluation support through research evidence, guidance, and other mechanisms was positive. For most practitioners, evaluation itself and the level of understanding of impact evaluation are at early stages. The primary goals for those undertaking impact evaluation were found to be professional and organizational learning, thus there is a need for practical help and guidance in these areas. Time limitation appeared to be a significant factor in the responses – particularly with smaller organizations – suggesting that their portal material would provide much-needed assistance to such organizations. Finally, it was concluded that future emphasis should be placed on developing practical applications rather than pure research.

Commentary

This study reports on research into the professional needs of practitioners in the museum, archive, and library sectors who are undergoing an impact evaluation. Previous studies (Wavell, Baxter, Johnson & Williams) have shown that impact evaluation can pose many challenges to practitioners, due to the lack of available

mechanisms to accurately assess impact. The authors provide a detailed literature review to further explain the current climate of evaluation.

This study undertook an interesting methodology to avoid some of the problems encountered in typical questionnaires that ask about information needs. Without having proper knowledge of available solutions, questionnaire respondents may have difficulty identifying their actual information needs. By combining the survey with a web portal that presents available solutions as the authors have done, the respondents can develop an appreciation for their actual information needs. The web portal used for this study was built from knowledge gained on a previous study by the authors.

One the flip side, by piggybacking this study on the back of a web portal, this methodology leads to some confusion. It appears that the survey was designed to both evaluate a web portal and to determine support needs for practitioners for impact evaluation. The study findings seem to address the former issue while the conclusions, the latter. Was it worthwhile to combine these two objectives? Was the survey instrument effective in addressing the two needs of the study? It is difficult to say because the survey questions were unfortunately not provided, so one cannot assess whether the questions fairly addressed both issues or if they were more geared toward one or the other. As well, without the survey questions, it is not possible to replicate the study based on the information provided.

Similarly, screen shots of the web portal would also have been a useful aid to understand the feedback responses on the portal itself. As with the survey questions, no images of the web portal were included with the study.

One of the concerns about the study is the sample size. Of 50 people invited to participate, only 21 actually completed the survey – 10, 6, and 4 from the museum, archive, and library sectors respectively. One participant was from all sectors. Unfortunately, the low participation rate does not give sufficient numbers to draw conclusions that can be applied across the professions. The authors, however, do acknowledge this limitation. Another concern is that considering there are as many participants from the museum sector as the other two combined, some of the findings might well be skewed towards the needs of museum practitioners.

The study is not particularly clear on how the participants were chosen. There is some indication that they may have been previous users of the web portal, but there is also indication that participants were recruited via cold calling.

There are some inaccuracies in Table 1 in the number and percentage of questionnaires

sent. The percentages total 117% and the numbers total 60, rather than 51 as shown in the Table. This is an error in the number of Archives questionnaires sent; Table 1 shows 19 whereas the text mentions ten.

Unfortunately, with the low response rate, the results must be regarded as anecdotal. That being said, the results do give some insight into the current state of research and support for impact evaluations. As well, the authors did receive some valuable feedback on the available features, and the organization and presentation of content on their web portal.

Works Cited

Wavell, Caroline, Graeme Baxter, Ian Johnson, and Dorothy Williams. "Impact Evaluation of Museums, Archives and Libraries: Available Evidence Project." 2002. The Robert Gordon University. 4 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/files/imreport.pdf>>.