

AT A GLANCE

Evaluability Assessment: A Step Model

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Introduction

Outcome evaluations are an important source of evidence in the evidence-informed decision making (EIDM) process, particularly when there is insufficient existing evidence in peer-reviewed and grey literature, or an organization is adapting a proven intervention to a new setting or population.¹ However, outcome evaluations can be resource-intensive and should only be undertaken if the results of the evaluation will be used in decision making.^{2,3} Evaluability assessments (EA) are a method which can be used to ensure a program or intervention is ready for an outcome evaluation prior to conducting the evaluation.⁴

Background

EA “is a method for examining a program (or a proposed program) to assess its structure, to determine plausibility of the program achieving intended goals, the evaluability of those goals, and the utility of implementing further evaluation of the program.”^[2 (p.11)] The method of EA was developed by Wholey in the 1970s to improve the usefulness and quality of outcome evaluations.⁵

For a program to be ready for an outcome evaluation it must meet four conditions:

1. The program is clearly defined, and all program partners share an understanding of the audience, activities, objectives and goals; and agree that the program’s resources and planned activities will lead to the proposed objectives and goals.
2. The information needs of the intended users of the evaluation are clearly defined and agreed upon.
3. The data needed for the evaluation are accessible.
4. The evaluation results will be used by the intended users.^{3,6}

A number of step models for EA have been examined in the literature, but no one model has been identified as a preferred model.⁵ In addition, few authors are explicit about how the step models were operationalized in their EA studies.⁵

This At A Glance summarizes the result of a systematic search and literature synthesis conducted to provide further guidance on how to conduct an EA and the known facilitators and challenges that may arise during the process.

Conducting an EA includes involving people who have an interest in the program or the evaluation. This can include funders, management, program staff, community members, as well as those who provide similar programs or services. For simplicity, we will use the term program partners to refer to these groups.

Methods

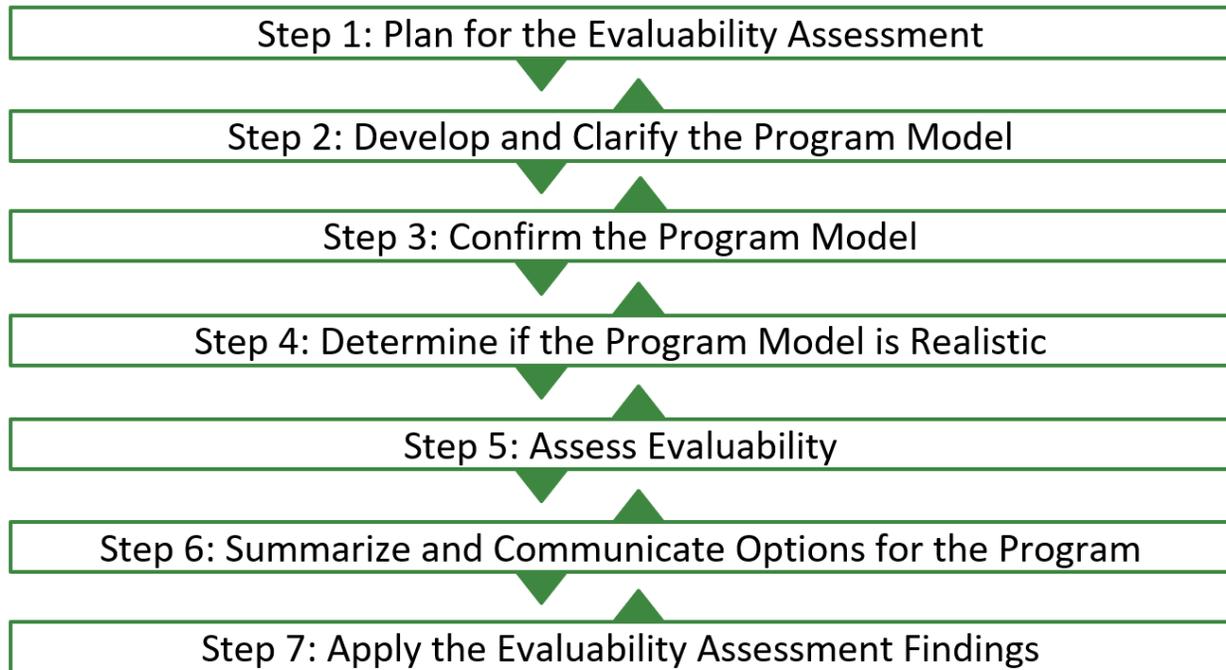
A PHO Librarian assisted search of the published and grey literature was conducted. Six databases were searched: MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Health Business Elite and SocINDEX. Articles from database inception to 2017, in English and French, were included. To identify grey literature, customized google search strings were developed and a targeted search of the following websites conducted: the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Better Evaluation, Canadian Evaluation Society, the American Evaluation Association and the Ontario Public Health Libraries Association (OPHLA) custom search engine.

The database search identified 49 articles, and the grey literature search identified 222 articles. Two authors screened all articles, including those which focused on EA (how to conduct an EA or reported a completed EA) and took place in a public health or health promotion setting. Ten articles from databases⁷⁻¹⁶ and nine from the grey literature¹⁷⁻²⁵ were included. The 19 articles consisted of 16 journal articles and three reports²³⁻²⁵ which focused on health promotion or public health within Canada, the United States, and Australia. Each source provided a step model for conducting EA or gave a general overview of processes.

Eight^{7,9-12,17-19} of the 11 articles related to EA of programs were leveraged to develop of the step model presented here. Four of those articles^{9,12,18,19} referenced steps cited or adapted from other sources,^{2,4,6,26,27,29,30,31,33} while four presented original work^{7,10,11,17} (i.e. created their own steps) resulting in a total of 14 included articles. As part of data extraction, data were retrieved for “steps to and/or used in conducting EA” and further analyzed. Additional information extracted from the sources included: number of steps and step name, purpose of the step, and tasks of the step. Next, all information gathered on EA steps from the two data extraction tables was analyzed and synthesized, and a new, seven-step step model for conducting EA was created.

Seven Steps for Conducting an Evaluability Assessment

Figure 1: Seven-Step Model for Conducting an Evaluability Assessment



Step 1: Plan for the Evaluability Assessment

Purpose: To identify members to form an EA workgroup and make decisions to guide the remaining steps of the EA.

As conducting an EA has resource implications, it's important to take the time to create a plan for the assessment. Determining who will carry out the EA and who will provide a supportive role is an important first step.^{2,10,17} EA workgroups can be made up of managers, program staff, public health graduate students, faculty and/or evaluators (internal or external).^{3,7,10,11,17-20,26} Once the workgroup has been established, it will need to determine, along with the intended users of the EA, timelines as well as available resources for the EA.^{2,10,17} Additional project management tasks could include creating a terms of reference to document how decisions regarding the EA will be made, creating workplans and developing a budget.³⁵

Health promotion programs often use multiple strategies and consist of multiple initiatives (e.g., train the trainer programs for food skills and cooking, changes in recreational centre procurement policies, supporting school and childcare nutrition programs with the goal of improving healthy eating options for children and youth). Therefore, it is necessary for the workgroup to determine, with the help of the intended users, the parameters of what will be evaluated.^{2,17,10,27,28} Key informant interviews and reviews of existing documents can be useful to identify what is to be evaluated and the evaluation's stakeholders.^{2,10,17,27,28,30}

Discussions with program partners will assist the EA workgroup in identifying the purpose of the evaluation, the information needs of intended users, and assessing the organizational climate and support for an outcome evaluation.^{2,4,10,17,30,31}

By the end of this step, the workgroup will have:

- Identified its members and how it will function together;
- Determined the program's audience and partners, the EA's intended users and their information needs;
- Developed a basic understanding of the program to be evaluated; and
- Confirmed the budget and timelines for the EA.

Methods used in this step can include project management, key informant interviews, and document reviews.

Step 2: Develop and Clarify the Program Model

Purpose: To develop a deeper understanding of the program by creating or confirming a program model.

If you have developed a program model as part of the program development process, continue to [Step 3](#).

Depending on their experience and involvement with the program, program partners can have a varying understanding and assumptions regarding the program.^{10,11,26,30} Developing a written program model allows the EA workgroup to determine if program partners, program funders and upper management have a shared understanding of the activities and intended outcomes of a program.^{2,17,26,28,29,31,32,36}

Typically, a program model includes the program's goals, objectives, strategies, audiences and inputs (available resources).³⁵ It can be a written or visual description. One visual option is a logic model, which shows the relationships between the inputs, activities and intended outcomes of the program.^[CDC, Kelllogg] An example of a written description is a theory of change, which in addition to the components found in a logic model, describes the context and underlying assumptions of the program.³⁹ A program model can also include a performance measures or indicators, particularly if an evaluation plan has already been developed.¹² Further information on how to develop a logic model can be found in PHO's [Focus On: Logic Models: A Planning and Evaluation Tool](#).⁴⁰

Development of the program model can occur through review of planning and evaluation documents as well as interviews.^{4,7,8,10,17,26} Wholey,⁴ Kaufman-Levy and Poulin,²⁷ and Soura et al.²⁰ provide suggestions for interview questions to use with policymakers, program managers, staff and other stakeholders.

Methods used in this step can include document reviews, interviews and small group discussions with program partners, the development of a logic model or theory of change and tables of performance indicators.

At the end of this step the EA workgroup will have developed a program model to which all stakeholders agree is how the program is operating.

PHO's [At A Glance: Goals-Based Evaluation for Health Promotion Programs](#) describes a ten-step model for evaluating programs. Completion of steps 1, 2, 3, and 5 contributes to some of the work of an evaluability assessment.⁴¹

Step 3: Confirm the Program Model

Purpose: To verify that the written program model aligns with how the program operates in practice.

Programs do not always operate in practice the same way they are described in program documentation or understood by senior management.^{3,9,17,26,27} Viewing the program through site visits or observations will allow the EA workgroup to confirm the program model created in Step 1 aligns with how it is actually being implemented.^{4,10,11,17,21,26} This can also be achieved through document reviews, meetings and interviews (either in-person or on the telephone) with program staff and the population being served,^{4,10,11,19,22} as well as reviewing existing data systems.^{4,10,11,19,26} If the written program model and how the program operates in practice are not aligned, it may be necessary to return to the program partners or the EA's intended users to recommend changing the program model or providing additional training to staff so that the program operates as it was originally intended.²⁶

Meetings and interviews with program staff can provide additional information necessary to develop an outcome evaluation plan such as program features (timing or seasonality of the program), setting(s) in which the program operates, number and types of people currently reached by the program (including geographic, socio-demographic and socio-cultural descriptions) and how clients are recruited/enrolled into the program.^{10,30} Additionally, this step can help the EA workgroup identify known problems with the program and any changes to the program's activities or features program staff intend to make in the near future.^{26,27}

Methods used in this step can include site visits or observation, review of administrative data, and interviews with program staff and the population served.

At the end of this step the EA workgroup will have determined whether or not the program is operating as described in the program model and collected additional information necessary to plan an outcome evaluation.

Planning Tip: Multiple steps contain the same suggested data collection activities, such as key informant interviews. Plan your data collection activities to collect all of the information you will need at each step.

Step 4: Determine if the Program Model is Realistic

Purpose: To assess the likelihood that program activities and available resources will lead to the program's intended goals and objectives.

To assess the plausibility of an intervention, the EA workgroup must determine if the:

- Resources are sufficient to achieve the intended outcomes.⁴
- Intervention is consistently and reliably carried out to the expected degree.⁴
- Activities are known to lead to the intended outcomes (e.g., through research studies, evaluations or a pilot project).^{4,12}
- Clients/recipients are receiving the necessary dosage and intensity of the intervention.^{2,12}

This can be determined using information collected in Steps 1 to 4, as well through literature reviews.^{7,12,21}

Following this step, the EA workgroup may determine that this a good time to inform the EA's intended users on findings to date.^{4,7} This is particularly important if the workgroup has found that there are major differences in the written program model and what is occurring in practice, if the program is significantly underperforming, or if there is insufficient evidence that the resources available and program activities will lead to the program's outcome objectives.⁴ The program's stakeholders and the EA's intended users will need to decide whether the EA should continue or if changes to the program are necessary before proceeding further.

At the end of this step the EA workgroup will have determined if the program, as it is occurring, is likely to lead to its intended outcomes.

Methods used in this step can include site visits and observations, a review of the literature and interviews with experts.

Step 5: Assess Evaluability

Purpose: To determine which elements and outcome objectives, including any health equity measures, could be evaluated.

The most important output of the EA is to determine if the program meets the four conditions necessary to design an outcome evaluation identified in Step 4. The EA workgroup will often determine this through indicators or checklists^{42,43} and/or in discussion with the intended users and program managers.^{7,10,17,28,32} During this step the workgroup can assess whether the evaluation could incorporate health equity outcomes as well.^{1,44}

At the end of this step, the EA workgroup will have identified:

- Whether the intended outcomes are likely to occur or need to be changed given program activities and available resources;
- Ways to improve the program to increase the likelihood that intended outcomes will occur;
- What data are available or could be collected for an evaluation;
- How the program could be evaluated for impact (if at all) and its estimated costs; and
- How the evaluation results would be used.^{4,26,30}

Methods used in this step can include an assessment of available data sources, review of the literature, interviews with experts and development of an evaluation plan.

Step 6: Summarize and Communicate Options for the Program

Purpose: To summarize the results of the EA, develop recommendations for the program and its evaluation, and to communicate these findings to program partners.

As the EA workgroup likely will have collected large amounts of data and information through the previous steps, summarizing what has been learned in order to communicate the EA findings can be helpful. One option is to arrange findings by the four conditions for evaluability or the program model components. The workgroup can communicate what they have learned through the EA to the intended users through facilitated meetings, presentations or reports. The workgroup may also want to recommend how to proceed with the outcome evaluation. Options include:

1. Evaluate some of the program;
2. Change the program to increase the likelihood it will achieve its outcome objectives;
3. Make no changes and evaluate the entire program;
4. Stop the program or do not proceed with an outcome evaluation; and
5. Ignore the results of the EA.²

At the end of this step, the workgroup will have completed the EA. In many cases after communicating with intended users, this may be the end of the process as the decision makers for the program may decide not to proceed with an outcome evaluation.⁷

Methods used in this step can include facilitated meetings, presentations and report development.

Step 7: Apply the Evaluability Assessment Findings

Purpose: of this step is for decision makers to reach agreement on changes to the program and evaluation design. Methods used in this step can include facilitated meetings and prioritization exercises.

Following the completion of the EA, decisions need to be made regarding:

- What changes should be made to how a program is operating in practice;
- What resources are available and appropriate timelines for an outcome evaluation;
- How results from an outcome evaluation will be used; and
- Whether to proceed with an outcome evaluation.

As described in [Step 1](#), the EA workgroup may or may not include those able to make decisions regarding the program and its evaluation.²⁶ Therefore program decision makers may meet separately to determine next steps, if any, for an outcome evaluation. These conversations can occur using usual processes for decision-making or through facilitated meetings and prioritization exercises.

At the end of this step, if decision makers decide to proceed, the EA workgroup may be asked to finalize a program model that aligns with how a program is operating in practice, to develop key questions to address in an outcome evaluation and/or to develop an evaluation plan.^{9,13}

Facilitators and Challenges in Conducting an EA

The included literature identified challenges that could hinder, as well as factors that could facilitate, an EA.^{3,4,5,7,10,20,30,22} Most of the identified facilitators were focused on engagement with intended users and included:

- Partner involvement in the workgroup.^{5,30}
- Updating partners frequently on learnings throughout the EA.^{3,4,7,10}
- Excellent facilitation skills.^{26,10,20}
- Clarifying the deliverables expected from the EA and their timelines.³
- Sensitivity to program manager's and staff unease with evaluation in general.²⁶

Organizational facilitators identified included stability of the program and management staff, having a clear understanding of the purpose and process of an EA, and an organizational commitment to evaluation and program improvement.²⁶ Additional facilitators related to the EA workgroup included effective project management skills,²⁶ documenting decisions regarding the EA,³ possible outcome evaluation and the program⁴ and efficient use of EA resources.⁴ Challenges identified included ensuring neutrality of the evaluator and preserving working relationships with stakeholders when challenging a program's design.²²

Conclusion

An EA is a pre-evaluation activity which, in addition to increasing the usefulness and relevance of outcome evaluations,^{5,7,9,21} can identify activities unlikely to lead to program outcomes,^{5,0,10,21} build evaluation capacity,^{7,11} and assist in developing^{7,20} or improving a program.^{5,7,10,30,21} This knowledge product describes a step model which can be used to carry out an EA. It also highlights some of the facilitators and challenges to conducting an EA. EA is recommended in advance of an outcome evaluation, in order to ensure scarce evaluation resources are used most appropriately.

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