

ASSESSING AND EVALUATING: DIFFERENTIATING PERSPECTIVES

by Ryan Watkins, PhD and Roger Kaufman, PhD



Data make the world go 'round, or at least useful data do. Therefore, it is essential that data relate to important questions, so that useful decisions can be made about what works, what doesn't, what to keep, and what to change. Data collection must consequently be precisely targeted toward useful questions and results, in which case data can play a significant role in ensuring that all an organization uses, does, produces, and delivers results in positive consequences. We suggest that data meeting these criteria are the result of two similar yet distinctive perspectives. One is an *assessment perspective* of data and the other is an *evaluation perspective*. Collecting and viewing data from both of these perspectives is essential for effective and pragmatic decisionmaking; yet the differences in how the perspectives are translated into practice require particular attention.

The results of systematic data collection, from either or both perspectives, can be useful to organizational leaders as they make decisions that result in positive consequences. Unfortunately, however, the results of data collection are often not used in decisionmaking. And when they are used, they are usually incomplete representations of reality. Whether this is due to an intimidation by quantitative reports or to inadequate decisionmaking models, many of today's organizational leaders are pursuing fads and making decisions without a set of valid, useful, clear, and measurable objectives in mind. For many organizational leaders, available data are more commonly used for blaming than for guiding the organization. But for the performance technologist, their perspective should also include multiple uses for decision data. What questions should evaluation data answer? And should these questions relate only to what has already occurred, or to what should be accomplished as well?

A Reactive and a Proactive Perspective

While using data for performance improvement is a vital role for decision data within organizations, applying data-collection tools and techniques from an alternative perspective, the perspective of an assessor, could achieve a second valuable benefit. From the assessment perspective, data are used not solely for determining the results flowing from current processes (that is, interventions, programs, training, activities) but additionally for forecasting the likely return on investment (ROI) of viable alternatives, including both alternative goals and objectives, as well as alternative processes. For example, the evaluator may ask, “What did we accomplish?” while the assessor might ask, “What should be accomplished in the first place, and which alternatives will best take us there?”

The assessment perspective (applied when conducting a needs assessment) attends to the harvesting of data that identify the gaps between current results and required/desired results (that is, needs) ... and then places those needs in priority order on the basis of the costs to meet the needs compared to the costs to ignore them (Kaufman, 2000; Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001). Such a needs assessment approach to data collection and analysis (before anything is used, produced, or delivered) uses tools and techniques that are commonly applied by evaluators, although from a differing perspective. The shift in perspective from an after-the-fact evaluation to a before-the-fact assessment alters the application of the data-collection and analysis tools available to the performance technologist. This includes asking further questions such as whether the objectives are justifiable and what the related costs and consequences of feasible alternatives to meet the needs are.

Therefore, the assessment perspective requires a closely related, yet distinctive, set of skills for the assessor, as compared to the evaluator. In today's organizations, performance technologists are increasingly providing data representative of both perspectives to decisionmakers and decisionmakers are frequently then evaluated on the basis of the consequences of their decisions (that is, value added).

Though the professional evaluator and assessor commonly share similar backgrounds and academic training, there are differentiating purposes of the two endeavors; either improving current performance or appraising viable alternative destinations and processes for achieving useful and justifiable results.

Often leaders believe that there are no differences between evaluation and needs assessment. We suggest that while there are similar tools to use, each requires a different frame of reference and orientation.

These differences make it difficult for professionals to succeed in helping organizations make essential decisions with-

out making deliberate and systematic changes in their perspective and behavior to reflect both the goals of the evaluator and the assessor as appropriate. From the initial goals of assessment to the structure of an evaluation findings report, the distinctions of assessment and evaluation require that professionals shift perspectives to achieve desirable results.

On the surface, differentiating the roles of the assessor and evaluator within an organization may seem superficial and unnecessary, as the two are so closely related by the tools and techniques they apply in performing their function (Kaufman & Watkins, 2000). Yet, like the design engineer and the laboratory technician who share similar knowledge of physics and mechanics and work with many comparable tools, the roles of the assessor and the evaluator differ in function rather than importance. For the assessor, whose

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role can be defined as making a preliminary determination of where an organization should head (and why) so that organizational efforts will be successful, the use of such “needs” data is essential for organizational leaders to make decisions (Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001). The role of a design engineer or a technician taken from the assessment perspective would be that of one who attempts to help others define discrepancies between the ideal (that is, required or desired) and current functioning of a machine, and then examines with the clients the potential success of several viable alternatives in achieving objectives.

For the evaluator, whose role can be defined as making detailed analyses for current capabilities in comparison to stated objectives, data are a primary tool for making judgments about what has already happened. This often leads to the continuous improvement of existing programs, activities, and interventions. A design engineer or a technician, acting as an evaluator, would be a diagnostician, one who measures the effectiveness of current mechanisms and operations to determine how (and if) they could be improved to achieve stated standards. Thus, both the evaluator and assessor perform critical roles within an organization, yet the distinctive goals of each require an alternative perspective: proactive versus reactive (see Figure 1).

Primary Role	Goals	Compares	Examines
Evaluator	Reactive	Current results with intended results	Ways to improve existing programs, projects, or interventions (if possible)
Assessor	Proactive	Current results with justifiable required results	The effectiveness and efficiency of viable alternatives for achieving required and useful results

Figure 1. Evaluator and Assessor Perspectives.

Perspectives

Two perspectives are necessary to determine requirements for organizational success: reactive (conventional evaluation) and proactive (pragmatic needs assessment). They both have concepts and tools in common, but they are not the same. It is easy to blur their differences. One determines the success in meeting determined objectives, while the other identifies what those objectives should be in the first place and then examines alternative interventions before critical decisions are made.

Organizational success often depends on two critical elements of management: selecting effective and efficient interventions (that is, processes, activities, training, programs) and the continuous improvement of existing interventions. Using management techniques in quality management, benchmarking, and re-engineering, successful managers in today's organization often must make decisions when limited data (or information) are available. The role of the assessment and evaluation professionals commonly focuses on providing this information to decisionmakers. However, assessment and evaluation are successful only to the extent that they are based on both internal and external value added. Let's take a look at how these roles may occur in an organization.

When making decisions, managers are often initially interested in data reflecting the organization's performance status on two points: intended results (see point A in Figure 2) and obtained results (point B). Using data-collection tools and techniques (frequently taking advantage of a combination of qualitative and quantitative data), professionals can capture a representative picture of the organization's (or individual's) performance at both points. The ROI ratio can often be calculated by comparing the costs of moving the performance

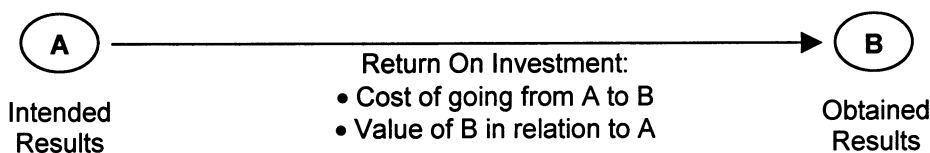


Figure 2. A Basic Evaluation Perspective.

from point A to point B to the relative value of achieving the level of performance at point B in relation to point A. Figure 2 shows a basic and conventional illustration for evaluation, one that most professionals would recognize.

The basic process of conventional evaluation does not include a component representing the required level of performance in terms of what should be accomplished. This notion of required results (that is, *what should be*) differs from that of

intended results. Intended results are conventionally defined by the intentions of the project, program, or intervention, and are based on what program developers believe are reasonable expectations of success. However, required results are not derived as a byproduct of program or project development. Rather they are specified performance requirements of individual, organizational, and community success that are useful as criteria for making determinations as to what programs and projects will be useful in achieving such results.

Conventional evaluation takes the goals and objectives as given and compares what was accomplished with what was intended. With the inclusion of a required level of performance (which we will call point C and label as justifiable results; see Figure 3), the performance technologist can now report on what was accomplished (point B) in relation to the required results (point C). In examining the path from point B (current results) to point C (required results), the performance technologist must shift his or her perspective from one of reviewing and summarizing the current interventions (that is, conventional evaluation) to a perspective that focuses on predicting the feasibility of multiple interventions (that is, pragmatic assessment). In addition, the assessment perspective requires that the performance technologist estimate costs of potential interventions, the cost of not achieving required results (point C), and the approximate value of achieving the desired results in relation to both the obtained results and the intended results (points B and A, respectively). We refer to this analysis of estimated costs and values as costs-consequences analysis.

The shift in perspective from evaluating existing interventions to assessing the potential value added of alternative interventions is challenging for even the most veteran of professionals. Yet the data that come from both are essential to effective decisionmaking. Without the predictive costs and value estimates determined by the assessment, the additional cost of moving to justifiable results (where we should be

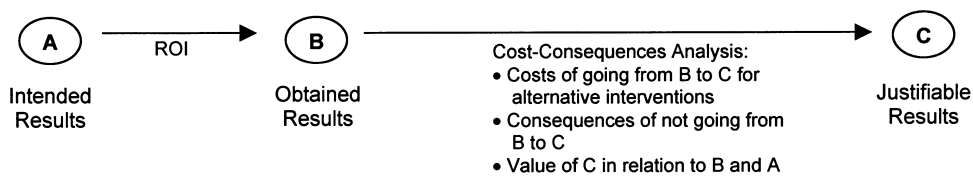


Figure 3. The Shift from an Evaluation Perspective to an Assessment Perspective.

heading in order to add value to internal and external stakeholders; point C) from current results (point B) cannot be included in managers' decisionmaking process. In addition, without data collected from the assessment perspective, the potential costs of leaving a need unmet is not available to decisionmakers.

Since the assessment perspective extends the process to include the required justifiable results to be achieved, the integration of strategic planning becomes essential. Strategic planning, the identification of required and justifiable (or desired) results provides for the assessment the destination (point C) that would otherwise be missing. Kaufman (2000, 1998, 1992) provides a basic framework for integrating strategic planning with proactive assessment, thus ideally increasing the likelihood that obtained results (point B) will be congruent with required and justifiable results (point C).

In Figure 3 we have represented point B as being along the linear path to point C (that is, justifiable results), but this may not always be the case. Additionally, when point B (obtained results) supercedes point C (the justifiable results), then a path from point B to C may not even be necessary. More commonly, though, organizations find that point B (obtained results) does not lie between the organizations' purpose and the initial results achieved (that is, an intervention, program, or activity has led the organization in a unintended direction). In these cases, the value of the assessment perspective is most appreciated, since alternative interventions will likely have to be considered to redirect the organization toward its justifiable objectives.

By applying the assessment perspective prior to an intervention and the respective evaluation, organizations can often use cost-consequences analysis to estimate the costs of achieving the justifiable required results (point C) directly from obtained results (point B) or by an alternative path through intermediate results (point D; see Figure 4) (Kaufman, Watkins, & Sims, 1997; Watkins & Leigh, 2001; Watkins, Leigh, Foshay, & Kaufman, 1998).

In application, assessment and evaluation procedures use similar tools and techniques

of data collection. Their roles within decisionmaking, however, vary from the retrospective to the predictive. This shift to the predictive perspective also requires that assessors have a broad understanding and knowledge of alternative performance improvement interventions (for example, the design

and development of training, electronic performance support systems, workplace redesign). Thereby feasible processes, activities, and programs can be identified and assessed for their potential impact. Working closely with evaluators of similar and related interventions, the assessor can make estimated cost analyses of each potential intervention along with an analysis of the consequences of achieving or not achieving results.

Pragmatic assessment includes the specification of required results that are both based on the required results of society as well as aligned with the required results of individuals and teams within the organization. The organizational elements model is a framework for considering the specification of required results. Through balance of three levels of results (Mega, Macro, and Micro), decisionmakers can better assure that everything that is used, done, produced, and delivered is aligned with positive societal consequences (Kaufman 2000, 1998, 1992; Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001).

- The Mega level of planning is focused on achieving results with the primary client and beneficiary being society. Results at this level are referred to as outcomes.
- The Macro level of planning is focused on achieving results with the primary client and beneficiary being the institution. Results at this level are referred to as outputs.
- The Micro level of planning is focused on achieving results with the primary clients and beneficiaries being individuals and teams within the institution. Results at this level are referred to as products.

When augmented with the levels of processes and inputs, the organizational elements model is a useful framework for

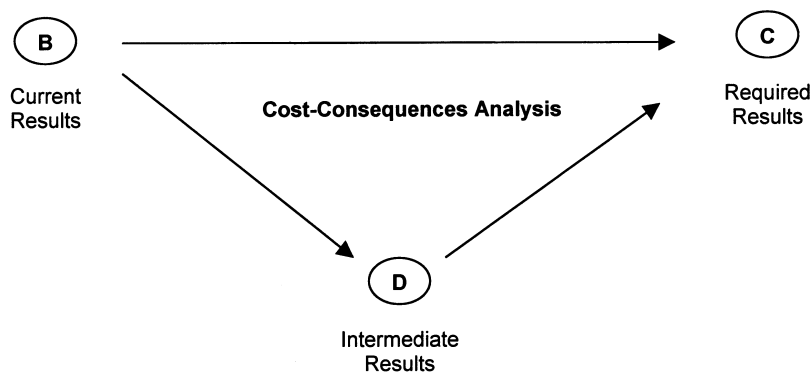


Figure 4. Using Cost-Consequences Analysis (CCA) to Assess Alternative Interventions.

defining all that any organization uses, does, produces, and delivers with the consequences they have on society.

Needs and Wants

In application, keeping pace with the rapid changes and increasing demands of today's organizations is challenging for even the most skilled and nimble of professionals. For many evaluators, meeting these stipulations for proactive and agile decisionmaking has meant the reapplication of tools and techniques for systematic inquiry at the outset of the decisionmaking process (that is, needs assessment). This inclusion of needs assessment, a precursor to pragmatic decisionmaking, within the capacities of common evaluation procedures is not, however, an elementary transition. The requisite perspectives of these associated yet distinct processes differ to a degree that requires recognition. One variation in perspective is focused on the discrimination of *needs* and *wants*. These differences in perspective are indicative of the distinctions between needs assessment and evaluation processes and procedures.

For many professionals, the discrimination of *needs* and *wants* may be considered a contention of semantics. Yet for leaders in the fields of both evaluation and needs assessment (for example, Scriven and Kaufman respectively), the distinctions of language are seen as critical hallmarks of the professions (Scriven, 1991; Kaufman, 2000, 1992). The manner in which professionals distinguish between *needs* and *wants* leaves a crucial impression on the perspectives brought to bear in the assessment or evaluation processes and procedures.

For the evaluator conducting a needs assessment, it has been suggested that *needs* differ from *wants* on the basis of an individual's or organization's objective necessities. "The objective test of a *need* is a test of, or inference to, the subject's objective, rather than subjective, welfare in the absence of the alleged *need*" (Scriven, 2000) The application of this variable distinction of needs and wants is, however, problematic, since undefined "welfare in the absence" is a subjective criterion and limited to the current frames of reference. For example, in accordance with the proposed perspective on needs and wants, in the 1960s it could have been concluded that safe facilities *need* asbestos protection, based on the objective (and widely accepted) evidence of the materials ability to reduce the spread of fire.

It is exactly this varying distinction of *needs* and *wants* that has fueled the advertising industry's cunning ability to raise the desires of consumers to a level of perceived *need*. Raising wants to a perceived level of need is common mispractice. By including beliefs and values in decisionmaking, individuals and organizations illegitimately raise the importance of wants to the demand of needs, thus excluding alternative solutions for achieving results. By lock-

ing individuals or organizations into preferred solutions (for example, brand name athletic shoes, new model cars, training, information technologies) disguised as objective necessities, markets for solutions (products or services) to no known problems continue to grow exponentially without regard to the deficiencies found in our society. For the conventional evaluator, the precise antecedents leading to the selection of a solution (e.g., training program, computer system, mode of transportation) is not of acute importance since it is the implementation of the solution that is at the cornerstone of evaluation. However, for the needs assessor, the premature commitment to a solution that may or may not achieve desired results is often seductive even if it violates his or her professional code of conduct (Watkins, Kaufman, & Leigh, 2000; Kaufman & Watkins, 1999).

To satisfy the uncertainty presented by viewing *needs* and *wants* from this evaluation perspective, needs assessments prevalently rely on a results-discrepancy definition of needs (for a comparison of needs assessment approaches, see Leigh, Watkins, Platt, & Kaufman, 2000). Needs, for the needs assessor, are thus pragmatically defined as gaps between current and required results (Kaufman, 2000, 1998, 1992), permitting *wants* to encompass the full range of desirable solutions. For example, in conducting a needs assessment of one's health, the preferred description of need would be defined by the gap between the current and required health and survival as specified by a variety of performance indicators (for example, breaches amid current and required cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and PSA counts ... all of which, if out of control, can lead to death or permanent disabilities). This is contrary to the needs likely derived from the previous distinction of *needs* and *wants* that would have included the "need for" vitamin C, tetracycline, and other potential solutions to ill health (each being premature solutions to *needs* yet to be defined and prioritized).

When needs are defined as gaps between current and required results, we can then identify three levels of needs assessment for any organization. The first level identifies and prioritizes gaps in results at the mega level (outcome discrepancies). This level is external to the organization and is essential for pragmatic strategic planning. Subsequent needs assessments at the macro and micro levels provide data on organizational output and product discrepancies. Remaining discrepancies in processes (activities, interventions, programs etc.) and inputs (training, human resources, computers, etc.) are consequently referred to as quasineeds, as they address gaps in areas other than results. And it is through the application of assessments at all five levels (Mega, Macro, Micro, process, and input) that performance technologists can better help organizations define, prioritize, and accomplish useful results.

For the evaluator conducting a needs assessment, this transformation of perspective from that of perceived objective-necessity to data-based results discrepancy offers the advantages of unbiased decisionmaking. By disallowing individuals and organizations to elevate their desires (that is, wants) to a level of need and ensuring that all potential solutions are assessed based on their ability to achieve results, the evaluator conducting a needs assessment from an assessor perspective can guide decisionmaking toward useful results.

This difference in the perspectives may sound trivial at first. In actuality, it is essential for success and is one of the explanations for why the expansion of evaluation into the field of needs assessment has been limited in the past, while the fields of performance improvement and strategic planning have adapted more readily to the theory, models, and frameworks of needs assessments.


Alternatives

By collecting and reporting data from the needs assessment perspectives, performance technologists can provide decisionmakers with the necessary information for weighing the strengths and weaknesses of viable alternatives for achieving justifiable results. Potential programs, projects, or inter-

ventions should focus on the whole organization and its external clients, as a system, which includes the variety of performance improvement domains (for example, purpose, motivation, rewards, incentives, knowledge, skills, expectations, feedback, tools, and environment). Though each of the performance improvement domains may be appropriate for the closure of a particular element of a need (gap in results), the attainment of useful results commonly requires that a performance system (including combinations of solutions in several or all domains) begin with a focused purpose on societal value added (Mega).

In providing assessment data to decisionmakers (so they, when evaluated, will be found to add measurable value because of the impact of their decisions) it is the professional responsibility of the performance technologist to examine an array of viable solutions to determine their potential efficiency and effectiveness. Performing this role requires a nonbiased perspective of not only those interventions with which the performance technologist is most familiar (training or online support tools) but knowledge and data on alternatives (motivation subsystems, feedback techniques, workplace redesign, etc.) that may provide viable means for achieving required results. In completing a thorough assessment, a performance technologist should identify at least two viable interventions to be considered


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and systematically examined. The data collected regarding each of the alternatives can then be used by decision-makers in selecting the appropriate course of action for the organization.

Changing Perspectives

Differentiating these perspectives is not intended to disparage the activities of either profession. The integration of data available from both assessor and evaluator perspectives is essential for effective decisionmaking in today's organizations. Evaluation data are and will continue to be critical for making decisions regarding current interventions within most organizations. Yet it is critical for evaluators who want to move into the assessment role to understand the fundamental shifts in perspective that are required for success. The application of the assessment perspective requires a broad knowledge of alternative interventions, understanding of the relationships between the three levels of required results (Mega, Macro, and Micro), and openness to differentiating needs and wants. In adopting the assessment perspective, the professional can then more effectively assess the costs and consequences of alternative interventions for pre-intervention decisionmaking and inclusion in the estimating of a current intervention's ROI. 🏔️

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