

Engaging an external evaluator

This fact sheet provides some basic guidelines for engaging an external evaluator to help ensure you get the best person for the job.

Why opt for an external evaluator?

When setting up your evaluation framework, you will need to decide whether to conduct your evaluation in-house or engage an external evaluator. There is no hard or fast rule and both options have their pros and cons – see the 'Getting started with evaluation' fact sheet for a full discussion of these. However, some of the key reasons you might decide to go with an external evaluator include:

- Ensuring your evaluation is perceived as impartial and given credibility by readers
- Ensuring the task is undertaken by someone with high level skills and knowledge in evaluation
- Providing an opportunity for you and your organisation to learn from an evaluation 'expert'

What is the process for engaging an external evaluator?

There are a number of steps to be followed when engaging an external evaluator, from seeking proposals to selecting and negotiating a contract with your preferred candidate.

1. Determine your total budget for the evaluation

- This should include all expenses such as contractor/consultant fees, travel and accommodation (if required), design and printing of final report

2. Determine your procurement process in accordance with your organisation's policies and procedures

3. Develop a package of information to provide to prospective evaluators including:

- Information about the evaluation – what is being evaluated, purpose of evaluation, outcomes you want evaluated, expected deliverables, timeframes
- Your expectations regarding final report – format (online or hard copy), length
- Available budget – in briefing prospective evaluators, some people are upfront about the available budget in order to receive quotes that can easily be compared, while others prefer not to indicate a total budget as a way of testing the market
- What you would like submitted as part of application process – information about their evaluation experience, proposed methodology, itemised budget

4. Advertise as widely as possible including:

- Direct approach – send the package of information to individual evaluators you are aware of and to organisations such as universities or consultancy firms that specialise in evaluation. Put a list together by seeking recommendations from others, doing your own online search and accessing the [Australasian Evaluation Society's consultant database](#).
- Through networks – send an email through your networks for general distribution
- Online – promote via your website, Facebook page and other social media sites

5. Selection process

- Determine clear criteria for assessment of proposals (see below)
- Convene a selection panel of at least three people to review proposals – e.g. staff member from the initiative being evaluated, external stakeholder involved with the initiative, someone with evaluation experience/knowledge
- Decide if there is a need to interview a shortlist of evaluators and if so, what key questions you want them to answer or additional information you want them to provide
- For your preferred evaluator, identify any points you need to negotiate before committing to a contract (e.g. budget, methodology)
- For your preferred evaluator, conduct a referee check with previous evaluation clients

6. Contract negotiation

- Ensure agreement is reached on the evaluation plan and general methodology before entering into a contract
- Develop a contract which clearly outlines milestones, timeframes, budget, payment schedule and progress reporting

What qualities should you look for in an external evaluator?

The specific qualities you are seeking in an external evaluator will vary depending on the nature of your evaluation. However, some questions you might like to think about as part of the selection process include:

Experience

- How many evaluations have they completed previously?
- What types of clients have they worked for?
- What types of evaluation do they have experience with – e.g. quantitative, qualitative?
- What methods do they have most experience of – e.g. focus groups and interviews with community members, surveys, data analysis etc.?
- Does their experience match the type of evaluation you are seeking?

Knowledge

- Do they demonstrate high level knowledge about evaluation methods and processes?
- Do they have knowledge about the arts and cultural sector and/or the community or non-profit sector (if relevant)?

Methodology

- Is the proposed methodology clear, logical, detailed and ethical?
- Is the methodology appropriate to the initiative being evaluated and potential evaluation participants?
- Will the methodology give you the answers you are seeking from the evaluation?
- Does the methodology align with your evaluation goals?
- Do they seem willing to work collaboratively with you and remain flexible and responsive as the evaluation unfolds?

Quality

- Do they have any examples of previous evaluations you can look at?
- Do they have referees you can follow up with?

Value for money

- How does the budget compare with that of other proposals? Is it value for money? Is it too ambitious?
- Are all costs included in the budget, such as travel and accommodation?
- What costs will you need to cover separately yourself, such as printing?

How should you work with the external evaluator?

Once you have contracted an evaluator, it is important that processes are in place to work effectively together over the course of the evaluation. This can be assisted by:

- Identifying a 'go to' person for the evaluator to contact as needed
- Setting up regular check-in meetings to discuss progress and address any issues as they arise
- Being available to the evaluator as needed to answer questions, facilitate access to evaluation participants, provide feedback on data collection tools/draft reports and problem-solve issues in a timely way

At the end of the process, there is considerable value in debriefing with the evaluator about what worked well and what could be improved as part of future evaluations.