

The Certification of Program Evaluators

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A Pilot Survey of Clients and Employers

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This study was undertaken as a pilot project for a Canada-wide survey. Most of the subjects interviewed were located in British Columbia, with a few from Québec and the National Capital. The findings are therefore not necessarily representative of opinion found throughout the country. Nonetheless, we thought that members would find them interesting. Subject to other demands on volunteer and dollar resources, the country-wide survey will be conducted at an appropriate time in the future.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

The Canadian Evaluation Society has undertaken to explore the issues surrounding the professional certification or licensing of those who work in the field of program evaluation. The essence of certification involves the appraisal by professional peers of the applicant's skills and knowledge against standards accepted within a profession.

One step in CES's examination of the issues surrounding certification was to ascertain the thoughts and attitudes regarding the professional certification of evaluators of individuals who contract evaluators to work as consultants and/or who employ evaluators in salaried positions. A pilot survey was conducted to obtain the perceptions and opinions of clients and employers on the advantages and disadvantages of certification. For a variety of reasons (outlined in the next

section), however, the study was unable to be conducted as planned. Thus, while the following contains a summary of survey's results, the small response rate precludes any meaningful interpretation of the findings.

B. STUDY METHODOLOGY

The terms of reference for the study were developed by the Professional Development Committee of National Council. The study was coordinated by the executive of the B.C. chapter and managed by a consultant under an honorarium contract with the chapter.

It was initially planned to interview (via telephone or in person) approximately 15 individuals in three provinces: British Columbia, Quebec, and New Brunswick, for a total of 45 interviews. Three CES members, one each in the above three provinces, volunteered (or were contracted, as was the case in B.C.) to conduct the interviews. A fourth CES member from the National Capital chapter volunteered to conduct approximately five interviews in the Ottawa area. In consultation with the volunteers from the above four chapters, the consultant developed a brief questionnaire to examine selected issues regarding clients' and employers' attitudes regarding the certification of evaluators. The respondents were clients and/or employers selected from among federal and provincial ministries and agencies, local governments, not-for-profit agencies, and private firms.

In the end, 27 individuals were interviewed, 18 in B.C., six in Quebec, and three in Ottawa. The reason for the low response rate appears to be based on a lack of interest in the survey's central topic. According to the volunteer interviewers, a significant number of potential respondents, with the exception of those in B.C., appeared to be indifferent to the issues regarding the certification of evaluators and were therefore unwilling to complete the questionnaire. Whether the respondents in B.C. were in fact more interested in the topic than those in the other provinces is confounded by a form of "interviewer bias": the interviewer in B.C. was also the consultant contracted to manage the study. The remuneration, however modest, was perhaps an incentive to be more persistent in contacting the chapter's quota of potential respondents.

II. FINDINGS

A. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

TABLE 1

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION REPRESENTED BY RESPONDENTS	N	%
Provincial Ministries	10	(37)
Federal Ministries/Departments	5	(19)
Private Firms	4	(15)
Crown Corporations	3	(11)
Non-government Organizations	3	(11)
Municipal Departments	2	(7)
TOTAL	27	(100)

The respondents were individuals representing organizations that contract evaluators to work as consultants and/or that employ evaluators in salaried positions (see Table 1).

- a) A majority (12) worked in organizations that employed 2-4 individuals to work in program evaluation.
- b) Just over half of the respondents spent 50% of their work time doing program evaluations, while the remaining individuals worked "occasionally" in the area of program evaluation.
- c) The scope of the respondents' work was primarily provincial in nature.
- d) The range of budgets of the program evaluations that respondents were involved with was from \$3000 to \$700,000.

B. POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF CERTIFICATION ON:**1. Technical quality of evaluation**

- a) Approximately one third (10) of the respondents thought professional certification would have a positive effect on the quality of evaluation and evaluation-related work (e.g., more rigour, more up to date, more relevant, ensure objectivity, ensure basic skills and theoretical knowledge).
- b) Seven others indicated that there would be no difference (e.g., always hire technically qualified individuals, quality depends more on personal characteristics of individual).
- c) Five respondents commented that whether the quality of evaluations would improve if evaluators were certified would depend primarily on the nature or type of the certification process that potential evaluators underwent.

2. Integrity and ethics of evaluators

- d) The majority of respondents (15) indicated that certification would have no effect on the professional integrity and ethical behaviour of evaluators.
- e) Three individuals responded that the certification process would potentially make evaluators more aware of ethical issues, and clients would have some recourse (presumably with the certifying organization) if they questioned an evaluator's ethics.

3. Public respect and credibility

- f) Eight respondents indicated that certification would have a positive effect on the general respect and credibility given to evaluators (e.g., potentially increase recognition of evaluation activity, reduce anxiety of clients, and enhance legitimacy of evaluation).
- g) Another eight respondents thought certification would have no effect on the respect and credibility given to evaluators, with several stating that an

evaluator's academic credentials would be considered more important than certification.

- h) Two individuals commented that certification could potentially create an "artificial" organization in which only a subset of those doing real evaluation work would participate, and which may become disconnected from the realities of evaluation practice and oblivious to the real needs of practitioners.
- i) One respondent thought that a "good program of continuing education would do just as much, if not more," as certification to enhance the general respect and credibility of evaluation and evaluators.

4. Hiring of evaluators

- j) Two thirds of the respondents indicated they thought certification would potentially have a positive effect on the hiring of evaluators. For example, several commented that clients or employers may feel they have to do less background research or checking references of potential consultants or employees if a certification process was in place, and that certification would provide some sort of basic guarantee or assurance of quality.
- k) Three people commented that the certifying organization would also provide some recourse in case the evaluator failed to meet expectations.
- l) Eight respondents stated that whether a potential consultant or employee was certified as an evaluator would make no difference in their hiring decision. The general feeling among these individuals was that skills other than those possibly ensured by certification are necessary, such as communication skills, writing ability, facilitating group processes, management skills, and flexibility combined with rigour.

5. Growth and creativity of evaluators

- m) Three quarters of respondents indicated they thought certification would have little or no effect on the growth and creativity of evaluators.

- n) Three individuals thought that certification might rigidify the practice of evaluation, e.g., "field would become dominated by evaluation research perspective with an over-emphasis on methodological sophistication and an under-emphasis on responsiveness to client needs" and "may make practice of evaluation too structured, too full of standard approaches that crowd out new approaches."
- o) In contrast, one person thought that certification may create a forum, a synergy among evaluators from different milieus, and/or more possibilities for mutual exchange of ideas and enrichment.

C. WILLINGNESS TO ASSUME ADDITIONAL COSTS RELATED TO CERTIFICATION

- a) One third of the respondents felt that whether certification would result in increased costs, either to be born by clients/employers or the evaluators themselves, was not a relevant issue and would simply depend on what the market would bear. Two of these individuals comment that evaluation budgets are generally fixed and clients choose evaluators who are willing to work within that budget.
- b) Another third of the respondents felt that evaluators should bear the costs of certification, either through increased membership fees and/or specific fees for when undertaking the certification process. Several people mentioned that consultant fees may increase if the membership fees rise substantially and the certification process fees are high.

D. KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE BASE EXPECTED IN CERTIFIED EVALUATORS

- a) The vast majority of respondents (22) indicated that a university-level education would be a minimum requirement for evaluators who are certified.
- b) Two thirds of the respondents thought that certified evaluators should have additional specific training, and areas suggested included evaluation, statistics, survey design research methods, ethics, writing, interpersonal skills, public sector operations, and finance/cost- benefit analysis.

- c) Four respondents suggested that good evaluators have skills beyond what certification would likely guarantee, such as good judgment, strong communication skills, good analytical ability.
- d) Four respondents indicated that they thought some sort of internship process should be required, and/or that evaluators wishing to become certified demonstrate a certain level of experience in data collection, data entry, data analysis, and managing a project.
- e) Two individuals suggested that there should be certification-specific courses required of evaluators.

E. GENERAL COMMENTS

- a) "The problem is not the competence or credibility of evaluators, but rather the perception of the utility of evaluation."
- b) "We must proceed carefully and cautiously because the damage is high if the certification process is not done correctly."
- c) "There are not many skills that are specific to evaluation. Most are general management and/or research skills."