

Evaluation: why we need it!

There are many times when we need to evaluate the services we provide; whether we are working in public sector providing front-line services to the community, or freelancing developing websites for business and personal clients. Evaluation helps us provide more effective and efficient services. This enhances the quality of our services, or increases our profits.

As the aim of evaluation is to become more effective and efficient, when we evaluate a service we need to think about two distinct areas; the processes involved in providing the service, and the effect or impact of the service.

When we speak of evaluating processes what do we mean? Basically we are talking about a thorough examination of the ways in which a service is delivered. How is the service managed? How well do different people involved in delivering the service communicate with each other? How is service delivery project managed? Where are the roadblocks to effective and efficient delivery of the service? What do we do that we don't need to do? What do we not do that we ought to do?

The answers to these questions vary enormously. The management of a public sector service is very different to the management of a small design agency. For a freelance web developer it is different again. The basic questions, however, remain the same and can be easily summarized. How can we become more effective and more efficient?

Before we can answer any of these questions we need to know what we actually do. It is amazing how many organisations from the very largest to the one-man operation find it very difficult to say in detail what they do. To say I provide web development services, or we deliver in-home care for the elderly is fine, but it doesn't tell us anything of the day-to-day tasks we undertake to achieve this. To do this we need to monitor our activities. Monitoring is essentially very straightforward, and is an essential part of any business or public service. It can take many forms yet all serve the same function. It provides a record of what we actually do.

So we have evaluated the processes of delivering our service, what about evaluating its impact. By impact we mean the impact on our service users and on ourselves. The impact on service users is basically customer satisfaction, although depending what type of service we provide that can take many forms. The impact on ourselves is job satisfaction and personal and professional or agency development.

How do we find out about the impact of our service on our users and ourselves? The answer is obvious, we ask. We need to obtain regular feedback from our service users (customers, clients) asking them how satisfied they are, what do we do well, and what could we do better? We also need to ask ourselves a host of questions. What do we do well? What could we do better? What skills do we have as individuals and as an organisation? What skills do we need to develop our service? How satisfied are we with our jobs? How could our job satisfaction be improved?

Evaluation is not complicated, but it is essential. There is no benefit to anyone in providing a costly service that is relatively ineffective. Monitoring and consultation provide practical evidence on which to make rational judgments on the effectiveness and efficiency of the service we deliver. In other words, monitoring and consultation provide us with the tools for evaluation. This in turn helps us logically become more effective and efficient in delivering our service.