

# Evaluating the Impact of Career Development Services in Canada: The Perceptions of Managers and Program Administrators

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## Abstract

Academics and policy makers have clearly identified the urgent need to strengthen the evidence base attesting to the efficacy of career development services. However, it is unclear whether those providing career development services also recognize the importance of evaluation and are able to engage in evaluation in an effective manner. This article presents research that examines the value agency managers and program administrators place on evaluation and the perceived barriers they experience in conducting evaluations. This article also proposes solutions to the barriers to evaluation described by agency managers and program administrators.

Academics and policy makers have identified the urgent need to strengthen the evidence base attesting to the efficacy of career development services. However, it is unclear as to whether those providing front-line career development services understand the importance of evaluation and are able to effectively engage in the evaluation process. The purpose of the research described in this article was to examine the importance managers and program administrators place on evaluating the efficacy of their services. The purpose of this research was to also examine whether managers and program administrators experience any barriers impeding their evaluation efforts. This article will examine the results and implications of this research. As well, it will provide remedies to the barriers described by agency managers and program administrators.

## Literature Review

For the past decade, academics and policy makers have argued that the evidence base attesting to the efficacy of career development services is weak and that more and better data attesting to the efficacy of career development services are urgently required. This theme has been expressed at national (2004) and international career development symposiums (1999, 2001, and 2003) (Baudouin, Bezanson, Borgen, Goyer, Hiebert, Lalande, Magnusson, Michaud, Renald, & Turcotte, 2007; Bezanson & O'Reilly, 2002; Hiebert & Bezanson, 2000). This theme has also been expressed in academic publications. For example, in their summary of the research base, Magnusson and Roest (2004) described the evidence base as "piecemeal, fragmented and un-systematic" (p.8). Others academics have similarly stated that although career development interventions are effective, little is known about why, how, or for whom they work (Dagley & Salter, 2004; Guindon & Richmond, 2005; Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003; Hughes, 2004; Whiston, 2003; Magnusson & Roest, 2004).

In recent years, academics and policy makers have taken measures to strengthen the evidence-base. Nationally, a group of researchers formed the Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) and completed the development of a framework for evaluation (Beaudouin et al., 2007). Internationally, three symposiums have been organized, (Australia, 2006, Scotland, 2007, and New Zealand, 2009), advocating for efforts to strengthen the evidence base (The International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy, 2009) and an international centre for guidance studies has been established

with the aim of providing high-quality and cost-effective research, evaluation and consultancy services that contribute to the development of evidence-based policy and professional practice (International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, <http://www.derby.ac.uk/icegs>). As these examples illustrate, academics and policy makers clearly recognize the need to strengthen the evidence base attesting to the efficacy of career development services and many are actively engaged in attempts to strengthen the evidence base.

Although it is clear that academics and policy makers understand the need to strengthen the evidence base, it is unclear as to whether those on the front lines of career development service delivery also recognize the need to strengthen the evidence base and are actively engaged in effective evaluation. The research presented in this article attempts to understand whether managers or program administrators (of agencies that provide career development services) view evaluation as important. As well, it attempts to understand whether managers and program administrators are able to evaluate their services effectively; that is, whether they experience any barriers to effective evaluation. In order to strengthen the evidence base it is imperative that those on the front lines of service delivery are also committed to the cause of strengthening the evidence base and are able to effectively engage in that process.

## The Research Study

The research presented in this article stems from a research agenda developed by the Canadian Research Working Group on Evidence Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG). The CRWG was formed in 2005 by a group of Canadian re-



searchers to address the need to demonstrate the efficacy of career development services (Baudouin et al., 2007). At the outset of their work, the CRWG recognized the need to engage in some preliminary investigation. When they first began their work very little was known about the state of either formal or informal evaluation practice among agencies that provide career development services in Canada. To address this, the Working Group decided to ascertain what agencies and service providers were doing in terms of evaluating the impacts and outcomes of the career development services they were providing. The research described in this article is part of this initial investigation. It was conducted, in part, to determine whether evaluation is valued by

program administrators/managers and to determine whether they are able to effectively engage in evaluation. Through this study, it was hoped that a clear picture would emerge as to the value program administrators/managers place on evaluation as well as the difficulties or barriers they face in measuring the impacts of their services.

#### Method

Data was collected through an online survey. The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) maintains a list of career development service providers in Canada, and managers and/or program administrators from each service provider were contacted via email and invited to partici-

pate in the study. A link to a website containing the survey, detailed instructions for completing the survey, and participant consent forms were provided in the email message. Those contacted were also encouraged to forward the invitation to other individuals representing agencies providing career services.

The email invitation and subsequent participant "fan-out" method of contact resulted in a total of 147 agency or program administrators from across Canada participating in the research study. The majority of the agency managers and program administrators represented not-for-profit agencies (44.5%) and provincial government agencies (27.0%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Respondents by Agency Type

Kind of Agency/Service Provider	n	%
Not-for-profit agency	61	44.5
Provincial government agency (non-school)	37	27.0
Post-secondary institute (college, technical institute or university)	14	10.2
School within the K-12 system	13	9.5
Private (for-profit) career services provider	6	4.4
Federal government agency	4	2.9
Private practice/consultancy (self-employed)	2	1.5
Career services or human resource unit within a larger company or organization providing services for the benefit of employees	0	0
Total	137	100



The survey was divided into two main parts. Part I of the survey asked managers/program administrators to provide demographic data (for example, the type of agency they represent). Part II of the survey asked managers/program administrators, primarily through the use of open-ended questions, to provide information regarding the state of their current practice of efficacy assessment. This article will focus on participant responses to the following questions:

1. How important is it to measure the outcomes/impacts of your services?
2. What difficulties do you face when trying to collect evidence and/or measure the impact of your services?

Frequency counts were used to analyze the data collected in response to the question “How important is it to measure the outcomes/impacts of your services?”

Content analysis methods were utilized to analyze the data collected in response to the question “What difficulties do you face when trying to collect evidence and/or measure the impact of your services?” The content analysis procedure involved the researcher selecting 20 random responses. These responses were

then coded – that is, each unit of meaning was given a label. The researcher began to immediately look for similarities and differences in responses as well as to formulate initial categories. When this was done the researcher selected 20 more responses and went through the same process. Through this process the researcher continued to refine the categories and sub-categories that were emerging from the data analysis. The researcher continued the process (of selecting 20 responses and examining each response to determine whether it fit with existing responses and categories) until no new categories emerged. Data analysis was considered complete when ‘redundancy’ was reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Results**

The following section will describe the results obtained in this study. It will first examine the value agency managers and program administrators place on evaluation. It will then examine the barriers they face in conducting effective evaluations of their services.

**Importance of Evaluating Services**

Managers/program administrators were asked to respond to the following question: “How important is it to meas-

ure the outcomes/impacts of your services?” In response to this question, managers/program administrators were asked to select from the following three alternatives: “Not at all important”, “Somewhat Important”, and “Very Important”. The vast majority of managers/program administrators (97.8%) indicated that they believed the evaluation of service efficacy to be either “Somewhat Important” (24.6%) or “Very Important (73.2%).” Therefore, from this sample, it is clear that managers/program administrators place a high degree of value on the importance of measuring service efficacy (see Table 2).

**Barriers to Evaluating Services**

Managers/program administrators were also asked to respond to the following question: What difficulties do you face when trying to collect evidence and/or measure the impact of your services? The themes that were most frequently cited by agency managers and program administrators are provided below (see Table 3).

The section below will describe the themes presented in Table 3 in greater detail.

Table 2. Level of Importance Placed on Evaluation of Service Efficacy by Managers/Program

Administrators

Importance	f	%
Not at all important	3	2.2
Somewhat important	34	24.6
Very important	101	73.2
Total	138	100



**Losing contact with clients.**

The barrier that was most frequently cited by agency managers and program administrators was “Losing Contact with Clients” (f = 39; 31.5%). According to agency managers and program administrators it is very difficult to maintain contact with clients long enough to follow-up on the efficacy of their services. For example, one manager/program administrator commented that, “In some ways it is obvious that our services benefit students, but because there is almost no feedback mechanism, it is not clear how they have benefited from our services after graduation as we usually have no further contact.” Another described this difficulty by stating:

It is fairly easy to obtain outcomes after workshops, specific interventions, etc., but it is more difficult to capture outcomes at the end of service. We request input by pen and paper, phone, and email. Clients are not as inclined to respond when the process is complete. Counsellors get individual feedback, but any formalized system has not been terribly successful. When asking

clients to respond to an emailed feedback form, many are not able to access or do not have the basic skills to complete the emailed form.

This difficulty was also described in the following way:

Once clients become employed it is often difficult to monitor them since many of them want nothing more to do with the ‘system.’ This has really only been true since the ‘system’ has become aggressively punitive. Our agencies have to develop policies and procedures that will enhance the ability to monitor the client’s status. This sometimes includes cash incentives for client to report. As well, we send out client satisfaction surveys regularly and receive about a 19% response even though we send the survey with a stamped self-addressed envelope and a pen.

As these sample responses illustrate, agency managers and program administrators often find it difficult to evaluate their services as a result of losing contact with clients.

**Lack of time.**

The second most frequently identified theme was “Lack of Time” (f = 27; 21.8%). Lack of time was cited repeatedly as one of the difficulties facing agency managers and program administrators as they attempted to evaluate the efficacy of their services. For example, when asked to specify the obstacles facing agencies in their attempts to evaluate their services, one manager/program administrator commented, “Time. Often evaluation is never planned for and therefore the resources aren’t available to do it well.” Another agency manager/program administrator provided a similar response by stating: “Time - finding time to create a broader more encompassing evaluation strategy.” Other managers/program administrators commented, “Time pressures make it difficult for facilitators to spend a great deal of time collecting and reporting impact data,” and “TIME - to develop measuring process/method and to collect and analyze results.” According to agency managers and program administrators, lack of time to develop and implement effective evaluations greatly hampers their ability to engage in effective evaluation.

Table 3. Barriers to Evaluation

Barriers	f	%
Losing Contact with Clients	39	31.5
Lack of Time	27	21.8
Lack of Value Placed on Alternative Outcomes	21	16.9
Lack of Understanding About the Importance of Conducting Evaluations	16	12.9
Total	124	100



### Lack of value placed on alternative outcomes

The third most prevalent theme expressed by agency managers and program administrators was "Lack of Value Placed on Alternative Outcomes" ( $f = 21$ ; 12.9%). Agency managers and program administrators identified their frustration in not being able to measure a broad range of outcomes as something that reduces their ability to engage in effective evaluation. One manager/program administrator commented, "For some clients working less than 20 hours a week is a huge success, though not measured as employment by funder within their timeframe of case management (generally 3 months)." Another manager/program administrator commented that, "Success is always related to actually getting a job and not to the improvements an individual experiences on their journey to employment. For this reason, we have no idea about the marginal steps and successes because we cannot record them or spend time evaluating them." This frustration was communicated by one manager/program administrator in the following way:

The Contact IV database used by the Province does not allow us many options as to the status of our clients after closure. The only options we have is: employed, unemployed or self-employed. As a good number of our clients receive funding for training, either as a wage subsidy or professional education, we wish there would be some way we could include training.

Another manager/program administrator commented, "Employment is easy to measure. Black and white. The 'softer' outcomes that actually provide more in the 'human element' are not widely recognized by funders." Clearly, agency managers and program administrators would like to be able to evaluate more than simply employment totals. They would like to be able to demonstrate the value of their services in achieving other important outcomes that lead to clients building successful careers.

### Lack of understanding

The fourth most frequently cited barrier to evaluation expressed by agency managers and program administrators was "Lack of Understanding" ( $f = 16$ ; 12.9%). A number of managers/program administrators indicated that effective measurement is impaired by a lack of understanding about the importance of conducting evaluations. Managers/program administrators noted that government representatives do not understand the importance of measurement and evaluation. For example, one manager/program administrator described this frustration by stating: "Lack of political will - politicians don't understand value of career services and therefore don't ask for reports." More often, agency managers/program administrators indicated that often career development practitioners do not understand, or value, measurement. For example, one manager/program administrator cited, "lack of in-depth understanding of the importance of evidence-based decision making across many agencies" as an obstacle to effective evaluation. Another manager/program administrator described, "Lack of staff time or will. Lack of staff understanding of importance [of evaluation]." Similarly, another manager/program administrator commented that, "Collection of evidence not necessarily a priority for staff." As these sample responses illustrate, agency managers and program administrators feel that other stakeholders do not often fully appreciate the importance of evaluation and are therefore not fully engaged in the process of evaluation.

In summary, agency managers and program administrators identified a number of barriers that hamper their ability to conduct effective evaluations. The most frequently identified barriers included losing contact with clients, lack of time to conduct evaluations, lack of support for conducting broad-based evaluation and lack of shared understanding about the importance of evaluation amongst career development agencies and practitioners. The following section will examine these results, discuss the implications of these results, and provide some potential solutions to aid agency managers and program ad-

ministrators in successfully addressing these barriers.

## Implications/Discussion

### Introduction

It is clear from this research study that agency managers and program administrators view evaluation as a very important component of service delivery. However, it is also clear that they experience many barriers that prevent them from conducting the kinds of evaluations that would yield the data required to strengthen the evidence base and demonstrate the value of career development services. In other words, agency managers and program administrators share the perceptions of academics and policy makers that effective evaluation is critically important for the field of career development; however, they are hampered in their ability to evaluate the effectiveness of their services. According to the agency managers and program administrators the main obstacles impeding effective evaluation are: losing contact with clients, lack of time for evaluation, lack of value placed on alternative outcomes and lack of understanding about the importance of conducting evaluations (by other stakeholders). The following section will use a case study to provide solutions to the barriers described by agency managers and program administrators.

### Case study

One of the authors of this article teaches a credit course in career planning at the University of Lethbridge entitled Career Development 2000: Life/Career Planning. Students from all faculties and all years of study are eligible to take this class. It is designed to assist students in planning their career/life and to help them develop the skills for effective lifelong career self-management. The effectiveness of this course is regularly evaluated using methods outlined by the Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) (Baudouin et al., 2007). Prior to administering the course, the author identified the outcomes he hoped to achieve in the course. The author identified the following outcomes he



hoped the students who enrolled in his course would achieve: a clear understanding of the components of effective career development, an understanding of the resources available on campus to help them in their career development, a clear understanding of their strengths and how they could apply them to their career, a clearly defined career vision, a good understanding of possible career options that align well with their career vision, knowledge of print and online resources available to them in their ongoing career development, concrete career related goals and development of a personal action plan, confidence in their ability to successfully manage their career (as a university student and beyond), increased level of engagement/motivation in their other classes, confidence about their occupational future, and the development of an educational plan to help them achieve their career goals.

After identifying the desired outcomes, a curriculum was developed to ensure that these outcomes were achieved. When the course content was finalized an evaluation plan was developed that focused on evaluating the usefulness of the activities and lectures implemented in the course and on evaluating the final outcomes the author was attempting to ensure students received from the course. The usefulness of the activities and lectures was evaluated through the use of a weekly feedback form. The final outcomes were evaluated through the use of a summary evaluation implemented in the last class of the semester.

To evaluate the usefulness of the activities and lectures utilized in the class, students were asked after each class to indicate their level of participation in the activities/lectures and the degree to which they found each of the lecture topics and activities useful. Students were first asked to indicate their level of participation by identifying whether they did not participate, they somewhat participated or they fully participated (students were asked this question to legitimize the data collected on the subsequent question regarding their perception of the usefulness of the activities/lectures –if they did not participate in the activity or lecture they would not be able to provide an accurate rating

of its utility). After clarifying their level of participation students were asked to indicate how useful they found the activities and topics. In rating the usefulness of the activities/lecture topics, students were asked to follow a two-step process. First, they were asked to decide whether they found the activity/topic useful, then they were asked to assign an appropriate rating. They were provided with the following options: not useful, not really useful (but almost ok), minimally useful, somewhere between useful and extremely useful, or extremely useful. This evaluation was easy and quick to implement. It took approximately five minutes to complete but yielded very valuable data. It assisted the author in understanding which of the components of the course were particularly helpful to the students (and which were not particularly helpful). In this way, the author had a clear idea of the components of the class that needed strengthening and assisted the author in ongoing revisions to the course content and structure.

The final outcomes achieved in the class were evaluated through the use of a summative evaluation implemented at the end of the final class. Through the summative evaluation students were asked to rate themselves (prior to taking the class and after taking the class) on the various outcomes listed earlier in this article. Students were presented with a statement (for example, “confidence about my occupational future”) and then were asked to respond to the following question: “Knowing what you know now, how would you rate yourself before taking this course (on this outcome), and how would you rate yourself now?” In rating themselves before and after taking the course students were asked to follow a two-step process. First, they were asked to decide whether they would rate themselves as unacceptable or acceptable (relative to the outcome statement) before and after taking the course. Then they were asked to indicate whether they would rate themselves before and after taking the course as: unacceptable, minimally acceptable, somewhere between minimally acceptable and exceptional, or exceptional. As well, at the end of the outcome evaluation students were asked the following question: “To what extent would you

say that any changes depicted in the outcome survey were the result of taking Career Development 2000, and to what extent were they a function of other factors in your life?” Students were asked to select from the following responses: mostly other factors, somewhat other factors, uncertain, somewhat this course, and mostly this course. This question was utilized to clarify the contribution of the course in helping students to achieve the outcomes they identified as having successfully achieved.

### Application

This example describes an approach to evaluation that, if applied, could assist agency managers and program administrators in successfully addressing the major obstacles/barriers to effective evaluation they described in this research study. The following section will demonstrate this by applying this example to the each of the major barriers to evaluation expressed by agency managers and program administrators.

Losing contact with clients. Managers and program administrators identified losing contact with clients as a barrier to effective evaluation. As this example illustrates, evaluation data does not need to be collected at some future juncture in time to be valuable. The author did not need to wait weeks, months or years to evaluate whether the course was effective in producing valuable outcomes. When the students were given the summative evaluation on the last day of classes they identified that the class helped them achieve a wide range of outcomes such as: increased understanding of the components of effective career development, increased understanding of the resources available on campus to assist them in their career development, clearer understanding of their strengths and how they could apply them to their career, development of a clearly defined career vision, increased understanding of possible career options that aligned well with their career vision, increased knowledge of print and online resources available to them in their ongoing career development, development of concrete career related goals and development of a per-



sonal action plan, increased confidence in their ability to successfully manage their career/life (as a university student and beyond), increased level of engagement/motivation in their other classes, increased confidence about their occupational future, and development of an educational plan to help them achieve their career goals. The author was able to collect all of this outcome data as part of the delivery of the intervention itself. The evaluation was conducted as a seamless part of the service delivery and powerful evaluation data was immediately gathered regarding the value of the service provided.

**Lack of time.** Agency managers and program administrators also identified lack of time to engage in effective evaluation as a barrier to effective evaluation. The example provided above clearly shows that effective evaluation does not have to take a great deal of time. The evaluation tools that were developed for the evaluation of the course described in the example took some time to develop and fine-tune but once they were constructed they could be easily modified and applied to evaluate a wide range of intentions and services (there would be no need to continue to construct different evaluation tools). As well, the methods described in the example took only minutes to implement.

**Lack of value placed on alternative outcomes.** Agency managers and program administrators also identified the lack of value placed on alternative outcomes as a barrier to effective evaluation. Employment totals appear to be the outcomes that are most valued by funding agencies. However, if, for example, change in employment status is the only outcome that a particular funding agency wants collected, there is nothing preventing agency managers and program administrators from collecting additional data. As the example provided earlier illustrates, it does not take a great deal of time and resources to evaluate a comprehensive array of outcomes that result from service provision. Therefore, alternative outcomes could be easily collected alongside the outcomes desired by funding agencies. The alternative outcome data collected could be reported alongside the employment totals requested by the funding agency. The additional data could then

provide a more comprehensive picture of the value of the services provided and could provide compelling reasons for continued investment in the services being funded.

**Lack of value placed on evaluation.** Agency managers and program administrators also identified a lack of value placed on evaluation by other stakeholders as a barrier to effective evaluation. Other research conducted by the CRWG has clearly shown that other stakeholders (such as practitioners) also place a high value on evaluation (Lalande & Magnusson, 2007; Lalande, Hiebert, Magnusson, Bezanson & Borgen, 2006). This would suggest that the perception held by agency managers and program administrators that other stakeholders do not place a high value on evaluation is inaccurate. It might be more accurate to conclude that practitioners and other stakeholders are unclear as to how to conduct effective evaluation and are therefore hesitant to engage in the process or are uncertain as to how to proceed. Perhaps if practitioners were given training in easy-to-use evaluation methods that yield compelling efficacy data (such as the ones described in the example provided earlier) they would be much more engaged in the evaluation process.

### Summary

It is clear that agency managers and program managers agree with academics and policy makers that evaluation is of great importance. However, perceived barriers such as losing contact with clients, lack of time to conduct evaluations, lack of value placed on alternative outcomes, and lack of understanding about the importance of evaluation prevent them from conducting effective evaluations. But, as the example provided in this discussion illustrates, evaluation methods and tools exist that can easily assist agency managers and program administrators to overcome these barriers. Methods and tools exist that are easy to understand, robust enough to encompass most aspects of career development services, and are able to be easily incorporated into the practices of agencies and service providers (Beaudouin, et al., 2007, p.155). Career development agency managers, program administrators and

practitioners would benefit from increased access to materials and training that describe in greater detail methods such as those discussed above that can be easily and efficiently integrated into service delivery. Certainly, this is an important next step in the quest to strengthen the evidence base attesting to the efficacy of career development services – informing agency managers and program administrators about evaluation methods and tools that make the task of evaluation simple, accessible, and effective and providing training in these methods. In this way, agency managers and program administrators will be equipped to engage in the kinds of robust evaluations they clearly want to conduct – and the kinds of evaluations that are strongly needed in the career development field.

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