

How to Select an Evaluator That Is a Good Fit for Your Project

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There are any number of evaluators that are out there for hire, but not everyone will be right for your project needs. Like the proverbial glass slippers, some firms will have a vision that is too large and complex for what you want to accomplish. What others offer may be too narrow or tight-fitting for what you need to find out. When searching for and choosing evaluators, you really need to do some investigating, try them on for size, and see who is a perfect fit for your program.

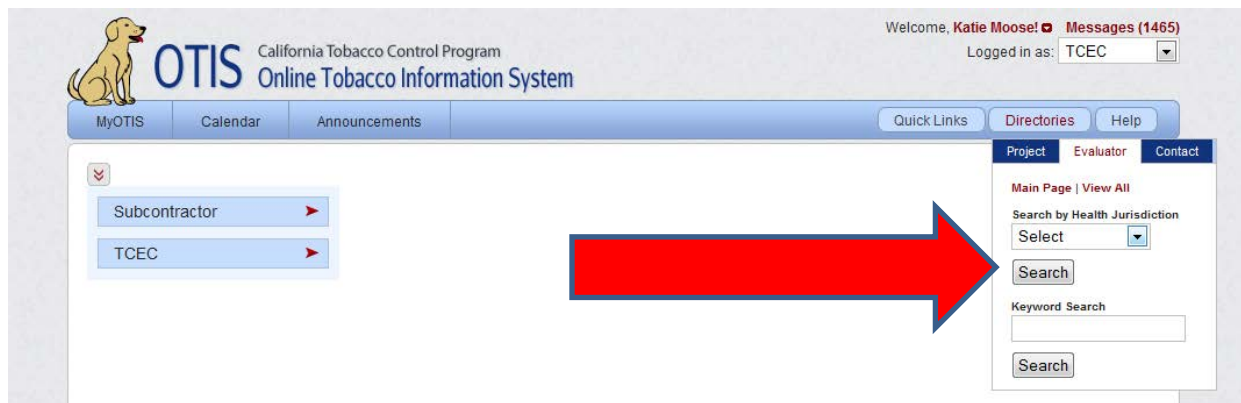


Photo: Christina Urias

Where to Start Looking

When on the hunt for someone to fill those evaluator shoes, where's the best place to start looking?

OTIS Database: Your first stop might be the searchable evaluator directory in OTIS currently containing 214 evaluators who have registered with CTCP and meet the minimum requirements needed to work on tobacco control projects. In the database, you can look at individual profiles and curriculum vitae. While this can tell you *where* someone has worked and for *how long*, it doesn't necessarily give you many clues as to whether they would be right for YOUR project.



Ask Colleagues: Another source of information can be other project directors. Ask them about their experiences with evaluators — who they've used, who they would recommend, and why. You might ask about which tasks their evaluator performs, to what degree the project is involved in evaluation activities, how they communicate with each other, the quality of the evaluator's work, their ability to meet deadlines, etc. While this may give you some leads, don't just take your colleague's word for it. Do your own vetting process to see if their recommendation is right for you.

Local Universities: Colleges or universities can be a good place to find researchers that do evaluation. But project directors we spoke with advised against being overly dazzled just because someone has an advanced degree. You'll still want to make sure they have the time or skill set to meet your needs.

What to Look for

So we've covered *where* you can look for evaluators, but how do you narrow down your list to one or two choices? What criteria or qualities can you look at to tell if someone has the right set of skills and qualifications? Before you start scanning people's resumes, take a look at your project's own experience with evaluators. What tasks did you delegate to your evaluator? How well did the relationship work? What did you find helpful or problematic? What could have been better? These kinds of questions can help you formulate a list of qualities, experiences and even tasks that you are looking for in an evaluator.



Final Evaluation Reports: Next you'll want to get some idea of the quality of work product that an evaluator generates. One measure of that can be the final evaluation report. If the evaluator was the primary author, a report illustrates how well they organize, describe, analyze, interpret and write up data. You may also be able to assess whether the evaluation plan makes sense. If you don't feel qualified to make those distinctions, ask the project's director if they would be willing to show you the scores and feedback the report received from the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center. That way you can see what strengths and weaknesses TCEC reviewers noted.

Data Collection Instruments: Another indicator of evaluation quality can be the data collection instruments that evaluators develop. Ask the candidate for work samples or look for them attached in their Final Evaluation Reports. Does the instrument collect useful data? Is it well organized and sequenced? Are the questions and response choices logical and easy to understand? Is the instrument appropriate for the population of interest? If you are making judgments on this basis, just be sure the instrument was created by the evaluator and not the project or another source.

Experience: Another factor to consider is the amount of experience in doing tobacco control evaluation. Tobacco control has its own way of doing things and someone who doesn't know the ropes may have difficulties developing an effective evaluation plan. On the other hand, just because someone's been doing this for 20 years is no guarantee that they are the best fit for your project.

Personal Style: It's also a good idea to explore whether your work styles will complement each other. Are you a micromanager who likes frequent updates from your team about progress on each step, or do you prefer to delegate tasks and let people run with them? Do you and your team work collaboratively to develop ideas or materials, or do you assign people to produce work independently? It's a good idea to identify and communicate these preferences and expectations up front so that you can see if your work styles will mesh well together or if they are likely to drive you both crazy.



Lastly, pay attention to the kinds of questions an evaluator asks you. This can be a good indication of whether someone is a good listener, if they understand your needs, and if they know what they are doing.

How to Prioritize Needs



After you've found an evaluator, you'll need to negotiate which tasks they will help you with. Most projects have a limited budget for evaluation, so you should prioritize which pieces of the evaluation might be included in the evaluator's scope of work and which pieces the project will have to do.

When budgets are limited, evaluators typically focus on "front end" and "back end" tasks such as designing the evaluation plan and instruments and analyzing data and writing reports.

Working Together

Communication is the essential ingredient to a good working relationship. Some projects have their evaluator attend regular staff meetings so they can hear what strategies are working well or might need modifying. Others check in periodically over the phone. And still others might only tend to communicate electronically to exchange work products and questions. Other methods for evaluators to stay informed of project progress are: shared calendars, monthly status reports, project staff diaries, online discussion forums, or retrospective staff interviews.

Finding and choosing a good evaluator will take some time and prep-work, but having a good working relationship with an effective evaluator is so worth the effort! Not only will the workload be lightened, but perhaps your project can get greater utility out of its evaluation by learning even more from successes as well as challenges.

