

COLLECTING DATA FROM PEOPLE

Data collection instruments are tools used to collect data about a program or program component. If the data already exists, it is a matter of going to the appropriate place or person and asking for it. If the data you want does not exist, you need to collect it. There are a few general ways to collect data. You can either observe what happens (using any of your senses to collect data), you can ask other people, or you can review documents. Getting data from other people involves either a questionnaire or some kind of an interview. You are asking people either to write down their responses or to tell you their responses so you can record them. The common methods of collecting information from others are:

- Mail questionnaires
- Face-to-face interviews
- Telephone interviews
- Focus group interviews

Each of these data collection instruments have strengths and weaknesses as shown in the table below. Use it to help you determine the best instrument for your needs:

Instrument	Strengths	Weaknesses
Written questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Low cost *Little interviewer bias -- uniform presentation *Good for quantifying responses *More convenient for respondents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Slow to implement *Questions must be carefully crafted *Open-ended questions harder to implement *Potential non-response bias
Face-to-face interview guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Ability to ask many, long, sequenced, complex, open-ended questions, using screening questions *Ability to probe answers *Good for qualitative data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *For large sample, high cost & slow to implement *High potential for interviewer bias
Telephone interview guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Very fast implementation possible *Ability to ask open-ended, sequenced questions using screening questions *Ability to probe answers *Good for quantifying data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Questions must be fairly simple *Number of questions is limited *Some potential for interviewer bias
Focus group interview guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Ability to ask open-ended questions *Interactions makes data "richer" *Ability to probe answers *Good for qualitative data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Expensive *High potential for moderator bias *Little opportunity to quantify

The review team can use this information to decide on the most appropriate data collection methods to employ. It is important that the team be mindful of the original list of evaluation objectives and any constraints and parameters involved in the review.

After developing the data collection instruments, there are a couple of things the team should do to further ensure their quality.

- First, it is a good idea to submit drafts of the data collection instruments to other evaluation team members for review and make revisions.
- Next, it is important to pilot test the instruments on a small subset of the group you'll be collecting the information from, to determine if the instrument does in fact collect the type of information you intended to

collect. When pilot-testing a data collection instrument, it is best to give the questionnaire to the group, or individuals, and actually observe them as they try to complete it. If they have questions or seem to be having difficulty understanding something on the questionnaire, they can ask you directly. At the end you can discuss the questionnaire with them and get their input about what is good, and what needs improvement. If you are unable to observe the individuals or group as they complete the survey, you should make an appointment to discuss the questionnaire with them afterwards. This input is invaluable when making improvements to the questionnaire.

In many cases, it may be necessary to get Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) approval of your survey. The Paperwork Reduction Act requires that OMB review and approve surveys and questionnaires.

Use the table below to determine if the data collection instruments you are using must be approved by OMB.

If questionnaire is:	And:	And it is:	Then:
Going outside Government	Asking more than nine people the same question	Customer service or customer satisfaction related	Call: USDA-APHIS-PPD 4700 River Road, Unit 120 Riverdale, MD 20737-1238 301-734-8511
		Other than cell above	Call: USDA, APHIS, M&B 4700 River Road, Unit 113 Riverdale, MD 20737-1238 301-7345152
Staying within Government	➔	➔	Department approval not needed

COLLECTING PROGRAM DATA

The second task you perform is to collect the program data using the data collection instruments you designed. **Program data** is information about the program.

Here are a couple of key questions to consider when collecting program data. There are no set answers to each of these questions. The evaluation team is best served taking a common sense approach to all of them. As we have said, some of the constraints and parameters of the review will predetermine several of these issues up front, like the number and type of information sources. In other cases, these questions will be open for discussion among the team. Here are some suggestions and guidance for addressing these issues. The questions are:

Where should the evaluation team go to collect the necessary information?

Most sources of information will be obvious. Key decision makers and direct customers are always useful to talk to about the effectiveness or efficiency of a program. There are also other stakeholders who are impacted by a program that should be contacted in certain cases. This might be an industry group that is indirectly affected by a program. Often these groups will have some important insights for the evaluation. Another source of information may be the individuals or organizations that are responsible for enforcing or implementing a program or regulation. For example, the field veterinarians that are required to complete the testing for the XYZ program may be able to provide useful information to help improve things.

The underlying principle here is that the review team should consider all their potential sources -- they "stretch" their focus and strive to be comprehensive. Once the team has done this, they have a responsibility to assess the reliability and integrity of those sources. If there is uncertainty as to the reliability or integrity of a source, it may be best to exclude that source. If you decide to contact the questionable source, you should closely examine the information collected from this source for potential bias or false information.

How many sources does the team need to collect information from?

The type of collection tool you use and the purpose of collecting the information will help you determine how many sources you need to contact. If you are sending out a mail questionnaire, you may choose to sample a large population to collect information. If you are drawing a sample in order to make inferences about the characteristics of that population, there are statistical rules that need to be met.

Other data collection tools, like focus groups or face-to-face interviews, do not have clear "rules" as to the number of sources to collect information from. The key to using these instruments is to ensure that all of the potential sources listed be represented. That's not to say that data from each source be collected in the same way; it may be quite appropriate to conduct focus groups of certain types of sources, and telephone interviews of other types of sources. However, there should be an opportunity for each source to provide input into the review.

ORGANIZING PROGRAM DATA

In most cases, the review team already has a keen sense of how to organize the data due to the work they completed when developing their data analysis plan. However, there may be times when information was collected that was not included on the analysis plan. Often, people will provide additional information about a subject if they're being interviewed. If the "extra" data adds something of value to the evaluation, it may be useful to include it in your results.

Under these circumstances, the evaluation team should look for general themes in these comments, and try to categorize them in a way that makes sense. For written responses, you may need to read the responses several times in order to come up with some scheme to categorize these thoughts. It helps to have several members of the evaluation team read the responses and categorize these comments.

Suggestions for categorizing this data could include organizing it by **key events** if critical incidents or major events are significant to the program, by **processes** if various aspects of the program processes are important, by **issues** if there are specific recurrent issues that appear in the data, by **people** if individuals or groups are the primary focus of the review, or in **chronological order**.

DEVELOPING FINDINGS

After organizing the program data, the next task is to develop evaluation findings. It is imperative that the evaluation team understands the difference between findings, interpretations, judgments, and recommendations.

Findings are “simply the facts.” They represent only the empirical results of the study and nothing more. A good litmus test to use when developing finding is:

Will anyone disagree with this agreement, based on the program data?

If there is a potential for disagreement, you have probably not written a findings statement, but rather an interpretative or judgmental statement. Michael Patton describes findings in this manner (Practical Evaluation, 1982):

“Findings should be information about which people can agree.”

Statements of judgment, interpretation, and recommendation provide opinions about why things are the way they are and opinions on ways to improve things. These are subjective statements which are always debatable.

A good way to develop findings is to prepare a summary statement describing the results of the program data in each category. Words like “only”, “always”, and “never” **should not** be included in statements of findings.

Determine which findings are useful or not useful for achieving the review objectives. Match useful findings to the review objectives.

DRAW CONCLUSIONS

After you've developed the findings, the next steps is to draw conclusions that will be useful for making decisions about the program or program component. The key to drawing conclusions is to return to the original review objectives and use these as a baseline for the conclusions.

Paramount to drawing conclusions is the need for the conclusions to be defensible and defended since they are judgments or interpretations made about the findings. They must be based on sound logic, appropriate information, and must be accompanied by an explanation of the review methodology and underlying assumptions. Valid conclusions can be drawn from both the information that was part of the original analysis plan and "extra" information collected during the course of the evaluation.

Without these, the conclusions may be disregarded no matter how "valid" they are. If the users of the review report believe the conclusions to be unfounded or off-the-wall, the recommendations made around the conclusions will be disregarded, and program improvements will be difficult to make.

DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS

After drawing conclusions, the evaluation team should develop recommendations that lead to program improvements. To do this, the team needs to develop a list of potential causes for each problem, which then leads to potential solutions and recommendations. One way to develop a list of potential causes for problems, is to answer each of the following questions:

- What are the important strengths and weaknesses of the program? Are they verifiable (i.e., is there evidence for each strength and weakness?)
- Which of these strengths and weaknesses have the greatest effect on the ability to achieve program goals and standards?
- What are all the potential causes of each strength and weakness?
- Which of these potential causes are most likely to contribute to each program strength or weaknesses?
- Did the review overlook features or effects of the program that should have been considered in order to provide a complete picture of its impact?

If the review did overlook certain aspects of the program, it should acknowledge this openly when making its recommendations. An example of such a statement might be:

“The evaluation did not examine the potential impacts that changes in export regulations might have on Program XYZ. Program experts believe that the impact is minimal; however, no testing was done to determine whether this belief is well-founded.”

Once you’ve answered these questions, you should prepare a list of potential causes from which to start developing recommendations. Potential causes that are deemed “less likely” should be dropped.

Recommendations should be directly related to the original purpose of the review and to the aspects of the program which interest the users, particularly the program decision makers. Recommendations are not a wish list. They should follow logically from the findings and conclusions. Suggestions should be directed toward specific aspects of the program or to specific actions, and yet general enough to allow enough flexibility to adjust the program in a manner appropriate to the realities of their particular clients, personnel, and program setting. Steps for developing recommendations are:

- Develop options to build on program strengths and to minimize the effect of program weaknesses
- Prepare a list of advantages and disadvantages of each option
- Identify option(s) to recommend, as a plan, based on the comparative advantages and disadvantages
- Review the recommendations to ensure that they are feasible, thoughtful of program constraints, and the best choice for achieving program goals and standards.