Evidence Act Toolkit

Tips for Conducting a Capacity Assessment

OES GSA

Capacity Assessment Tips

The Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) has identified several promising strategies used by Evaluation Officers (EOs) to conduct capacity assessments as they implement the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act). See the Capacity Assessment Overview for details on the requirements for the capacity assessment.

Although each agency will tailor its capacity assessment activities to its specific needs, these promising example activities may help EOs incorporate innovative approaches to assessing capacity in their own agency. These examples fall into three categories:

- Aligning capacity assessments with other activities;
- Designing and conducting effective information collections; and
- Managing resources for conducting capacity assessments.

Aligning the capacity assessment with other Evidence Act activities and existing agency processes.

Agencies already engage in several recurring management and performance processes that collect information from stakeholders across the organization. Agencies can build on these processes to gather information for their capacity assessment. The advantage of this approach is that these processes are already used across agencies and can be quickly adapted without adding substantial burden to existing responsibilities.

- **Align capacity assessment activities with other parallel or complementary processes, such as the development of Federal Data Strategy, strategic review, or quarterly performance management review meetings.** These processes are likely well-integrated in agency operations. Ensuring consistency with other activities can help use leadership and staff time efficiently.

- **Use planned or existing information collections or data calls for dual purposes.** Adding questions to existing data calls to help identify priority questions and assess capacity may reduce burden on staff and leadership in responding to these requests. Existing collections may also already be familiar to those who need to respond.

- **Identify underutilized data sources that may already exist.** For example, a review of position descriptions may improve understanding of potential capacity throughout the agency.

- **Focus the interim capacity assessment on topics that are likely to be high priorities in the interim learning agenda and FY22 Annual Evaluation Plan.** Assessing capacity related to identified learning questions and significant evaluations, even if preliminary, can keep the assessment within a manageable scope while addressing priority needs for evidence building and utilization.

Designing and conducting effective information collections or data calls

Several agencies have conducted or plan to conduct surveys or questionnaires to collect capacity information. This may be a promising strategy if the scope of the collection is well-defined, tailored to respondents, and followed by in-depth conversations.

Capacity Assessment Tips

- **Look to examples of information collections that have been done elsewhere.** However, limit the scope of the collection at the outset to what is required in the Evidence Act and OMB guidance (see OMB M-19-23). It may be easier to make progress quickly by focusing only on questions that directly support requirements of the Evidence Act.
- **Pilot a new or re-designed information collection with a few key stakeholders before rolling out to the entire agency.** This can help refine the instrument and ensure it is calibrated to capacity assessment needs.
- **Consider tailoring information collection instruments to different audiences, such as agency leadership, core data and evidence users, and all other staff.** Getting direct input from staff doing evaluation, statistics, analysis, and research is useful for gathering detailed data about current capacity, while leadership may have a broader view of relevant activities across functional areas.
- **Follow information collections with in-depth conversations.** Information collections may be most useful for uncovering capabilities, offices with evidence-building responsibilities, and ongoing activities that do not have wide visibility across the agency. Following up with in-depth conversations is a crucial step to understanding how these resources may support capacity for evidence-building and utilization.
- **Use responses from questionnaires and data calls to tailor questions and identify issues before an in-person meeting.** These conversations yield more in-depth information and are especially helpful for socializing the Evidence Act efforts across an agency.
- **Develop and share definitions and examples upfront, using clear and specific terminology, to build a common understanding among respondents.** This can improve the quality of the data gathered and help avoid time spent on less relevant information.
- **Leverage existing OMB policies, guidance, and circulars to help define key terms.** For example, OMB Memorandums M-19-23 and M-20-12 can be used to define "program evaluation" and other key terms.

Managing resources for conducting capacity assessments

Agencies are using a variety of approaches for conducting capacity assessments, which may require different levels of commitment of resources and staff time. Thoughtful and creative deployment of these resources can be tailored to specific agency needs to get the most out of capacity assessment efforts.

- **Convene a dedicated core group of people who can develop any needed information collections.** Having a core team distributes the workload and ensures multiple perspectives are incorporated.
- **When procuring external resources, such as contractors, to conduct some component of the capacity assessment, plan for a long design phase and for agency staff to be involved in the design.** This will allow the agency to determine its needs as it is designing the assessment and working with the contractor.
- **Include individuals with statistics, research, or evaluation expertise from a different bureau or sub-agency in capacity assessment discussions.** Having diverse backgrounds can help view resources and capacity needs with fresh eyes.