

Building the case for better evidence



Emma Tomkinson



Claudine Lyons

IPAA NSW's Young Professionals Claudine Lyons, NSW Ministry of Health and Emma Tomkinson, formerly NSW Treasury and Department of Premier and Cabinet explain the establishment and success of the 'Better Evidence Network' in their state.

The increased use of evidence in the development and evaluation of public policy and practice is essential as governments seek to enhance service provision and cater to increasing demand for public services without increasing costs. To become more efficient at delivery, public sector

agencies need to continuously measure the effectiveness of services and adjust resourcing and policy.

While recognising that decision-making necessarily considers values, ideology, available resources, experience and stakeholder views, learning from the experiences of their own and other jurisdictions is essential to modern policy-makers.

Government leaders in the United Kingdom (Cabinet Office, 1999; Strategic Policy Making Team) and Australia (Rudd, 2008) have supported the increased use of evidence in policy. During the 1997 UK general election then British PM Tony Blair declared: 'What matters is what works' (Wells, 2007).

In Australia, recent work has emphasised the need for an evidence-based approach to public policy and suggested ways to build and utilise an effective evidence base (Banks, *Challenges of Evidence-Based Policy-Making*, 2009). That work included the *Productivity Roundtable: Strengthening Evidence-based Policy in the Australian Federation* (Productivity Commission, 2009).

One of the key issues is the capability of public servants (Edwards, December

2010) in understanding the assumptions, limitations and uncertainties underlying the evidence before them as 'not all evidence is of equal quality' (Gluckman, April 2011). It is clear that 'people skilled in quantitative methods and other analysis are especially valuable' (Banks, 2009).

Participation is open and voluntary ... and had made a significant difference in reducing their feelings of isolation in the workplace.

So, how can we increase the capacity of public servants to use of evidence from research in policy and decision-making? And, are we too quick to underestimate our capacity – thus failing to make the most of staff?

In NSW, a young professional in the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) instigated the creation of the 'Better Evidence Network' (the Network), which provides a case study on maximising the potential of public servants' use of evidence. This professional development network was created to foster a culture of collaborative analysis and increase staff capacity by connecting technical experts across NSW Government.

The purpose of the Better Evidence Network

Public servants with specialist expertise and experience are often employed in roles with generic titles that do not reflect their ability. For example, while 'Policy Officer', 'Financial Analyst' and 'Project Officer', reveal something about the roles of these positions, they transmit little about the capabilities of the people who occupy them (these generic

titles are used across agencies in the NSW Public Service). This is not a problem in itself, but it does mean that information about staff members' specific skill sets and experience needs to be communicated in another way if Government agencies are to maximise the potential of their employees.

The Network was created to share this kind of information. It links professionals in the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet and the NSW Treasury involved in research, program and policy evaluation and data analysis, particularly modelling and forecasting, for the purposes of:

- Promoting the use of rigorous qualitative and quantitative evidence in public sector decision making;
- Supporting professional development in qualitative and quantitative methods – including peer review, improving access to relevant software and other resources, and developing skills in evidence-based methods; and,
- Cooperating with other relevant bodies (such as other agencies, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and universities) to achieve the above objectives.

The Network organises presentations by data collectors and analysts across government. These presentations not only share expert insight into government data, but where it is held and who to contact for it. Developing a link between the people collecting data and those analysing it, allows data to be used more often, more correctly, with more confidence.

The Network is primarily about improving the quality and ease of the core work of the departments. It provides members with information about which of their peers can help them plan or review analysis, and provides the departments with an internal *Continued*

resource bank of expert advisers. It allows for specific skills and knowledge to be recognised and used where required.

Creation of the Network

The idea for the creation of the Network came in 2010 when a young professional began feeling professionally isolated when performing quantitative data analysis and modelling in her unit, without having anyone to discuss her methods. It was assumed there were no quantitative analytical experts in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, as there were no units in the department with this particular function or title.

Contact was made with staff at the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), an affiliated research centre of the University of Canberra, and the Independent Pricing and Regulation Tribunal (IPART). A presentation centred on the joint work of these two bodies provided the opportunity for interest in the Network to be gauged via a targeted flyer (Figure 1).

In many high-level policy meetings, it is common to apologise for getting technical. The Network (as highlighted in the flyer at Figure 1) facilitated the creation of a community that welcomes and celebrates technical language, concepts and graphs. Response to the presentation and flyer revealed that interest in forming the Network spanned both NSW Treasury and DPC, and included many senior officers. A subsequent workshop attended by staff from both departments developed Network terms of reference; how it should function and best contribute to members' working lives. This collaboration from the start created a sense of a professional community and ensured shared ownership between the two central agencies.

Critically, senior executives of Treasury and DPC supported the development of the Network as an opportunity to improve core business, provide informal and free professional development and peer-review for staff. With invitations sent to all staff of both departments by the then Director-General of DPC and the Evidence Based Policy unit in Treasury, the Network was launched with a cross-agency panel discussion in March 2011.

The membership

Membership primarily comprises those with professional qualifications or experience in qualitative and quantitative methods and those interested in developing these skills and is open to any employee of DPC and Treasury with an interest in producing or using qualitative and quantitative evidence. Employees of other relevant bodies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other public service agencies are 'associate members', who participate in all discussions and activities but do not have voting power.

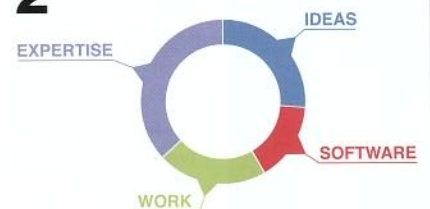
Participation is open and voluntary – many participants having not met previously, with some observing that participation had made a significant difference in reducing their feeling of isolation in the workplace. As at October 2011 there were 58 active members and a further 84 associate members from a range of government agencies including the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOSCAR) and the agencies of Health, Family and Community Services, Planning, Trade and Investment, Finance and Services, Education and Communities and the Environment. Membership continues to grow as the Network gains greater profile, with 50–70 people regularly attending bi-monthly technical presentations.

If you agree with the following:

1 Level of passion for modelling and forecasting



2 You would like to share...



3 Enthusiasm for strengthening Government data in policy development



You have self-selected to become a member of the Better Evidence Network.

FIGURE 1 Example of the flyer to attract initial members

Network activities

Every two months the Network runs a technical seminar open to all members, which allows for evidence sharing across government and presentation of solutions to common challenges in producing and communicating this evidence.

To date, technical presentations have included:

- Demographic projections by Department of Planning and Infrastructure and Department of Education and Communities;

- Treasury's Long Term Fiscal Pressures Model, which projects change over a forty-year horizon; and,
- BOSCAR - on the experience of implementing randomised controlled trials to evaluate the effect of programs initiated by the Department of Attorney General and Justice.

Presentations have been attended both by other expert data users and those interested in developing their skills. Presenters are encouraged to use technical language and concepts on the assumption that every attendee who goes back to their desk to search for the meaning of an unfamiliar term is building their own capacity to interact and interpret evidence.

The second aspect of the network is a human resource database of members' expertise, updated twice yearly to ensure relevance and shared with Network members so advice and collaboration on specific projects can be sought directly. This database increases the brokerage role the Network has between members, which enables 'information flow by bridging groups and bringing together existing advantages' (Rangachari, 2008). The database also includes information about software licences that members have and are able to share.

Governance

The Network receives strong support from both the Department of Premier and Cabinet and Treasury. Administrative duties are shared between the departments, overseen by a central committee.

The Network provides an environment for constructive analysis, self-reflection, open discussion and personal and professional development. By operating under Chatham House rules participation is encouraged and members are recognised as individuals, rather than as representatives of their employing agencies, allowing participants to interact as experts.

Next steps

The Network will create an intranet to further promote and disseminate its activities and, possibly, survey members' usage and views to further build on its strong but relatively new foundations.

**This initiative
illustrates the valuable
contribution that
young professionals
can make to the
public service.**

Conclusion

'Any agency that is serious about encouraging an evidence-based approach needs to develop a research culture' (Banks, 2009). In NSW through the Better Evidence Network agencies are collaborating to support a culture of critical respect for research and other data sources and professionals in maintaining and improving their analysis skills.

To date, essential success ingredients have been:

- The identification of a clear unmet need;
- The support of senior executive service members from both departments;
- The encouragement of young professionals to innovate and pursue their ideas for improvement; and,
- Creation of a welcoming and respectful environment.

Not only does this initiative demonstrate the overarching capacity of the NSW public service to create positive change from within, it also illustrates the valuable contribution that young professionals can make to the public service given support and resources to innovate and implement their ideas for improvement. ■

Bibliography

- Banks, G. (2009). *Challenges of Evidence-Based Policy-Making*. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia: Australian Government Productivity Commission.
- Banks, G. (2009). *Evidence-based policy making: What is it? How do we get it?* Canberra: Productivity Commission.
- Cabinet Office (Strategic Policy Making Team). (1999). *Professional Policy Making for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Cabinet Office. (1999). *Modernising Government White Paper*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Edwards, M. (December 2010). In Search of Useful Research: Demand and Supply Challenges for Policy Makers. *Public Administration Today*, 56-64.
- G, B. (2009). *Evidence-based policy making: What is it? How do we get it?* ANU Public Lecture Series, presented by ANZOG 4 February. Canberra: Productivity Commission, Australian Government.
- Gluckman, P. (April 2011). *Towards better use of evidence in policy formation: a discussion paper*. Auckland, New Zealand: Office of the Prime Minister's Science Advisory Committee.
- Productivity Commission. (2009). *Strengthening Evidence-based Policy in the Australian Federation*. Australian Government.
- Rangachari, P. (2008). Knowledge sharing networks relating to hospital quality measurement and reporting. *Health Care Management Review*, 33 (3), 253-263.
- Rudd, K. (2008). *Address to Heads of Agencies and Members of Senior Executive Service*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Wells, P. (2007). New Labour and evidence based policy making: 1997-2007. *People, Place and Policy Online*, 22-29.
- More information:
Claudine.lyons@doh.health.nsw.gov.au