

# “How To” Manage External Evaluators/Consultants

There are really good reasons to hire an external evaluator for your program(s), including their objectivity, specialized skills, and ability to serve as a facilitator and/or trainer. External program evaluators can bring a myriad of project experiences to the table. However, it is important to manage external evaluators, which will lead to managed expectations, costs, and results.

**Keep in mind that managing external evaluators will require a dedicated internal staff resource.**

*External Program Evaluators are typically:*

1. From a University/College
2. From a Large Consulting Firm
3. From a Small or Boutique Consulting Firm
4. Independent (solo)



Evaluators, like other professionals, vary in years of experience, skill set, knowledge base, specializations (education, health, etc.) and familiarity within diverse settings.

*Let's review a few pros and cons to consider when hiring an evaluator from the four types of organizations mentioned above.*

## 1. University/College



*At one point in time, a majority of evaluators were employed at universities and colleges.*

**Pros:** Many universities and colleges have research departments with concentrations in social sciences, psychology, education, economics, health, etc. Within these departments, they may have staff with a niche focus on program evaluation; sometimes there is an academic center focused exclusively on program evaluation. University staff, such as professors, assistant professors, as well as PhD students, typically partner with nonprofits, governmental agencies, and other organizations to study and conduct evaluations of community, state, and federal programs. Staff may have many years of experience, strong technical skills, and be well-versed in research and program evaluation however, this is not a guarantee. Another benefit is that staff may involve graduate or college students, which can lower costs for a project.

**Cons:** Sometimes university/college staff may be looking to supplement their own existing or future research with an evaluation at your food bank. This could be a drawback if there is misalignment in goals and objectives between both parties, which could lead to a compromise in quality of work or end results. Therefore, it is important to confirm that there is alignment once a relationship has been established. Also, if the most experienced staff on an evaluation, such as a professor or PhD student, is not heavily involved or leading the evaluation, then the project may be led and executed by students; although this is not necessarily a disadvantage, the skill level and knowledge of graduate students may not be as significant. Finally, timing and completion of a project may be influenced by the semester and quarter systems of the university.

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## 2. Large Consulting Firm

*Some large consulting firms already support non-profit and governmental agencies with technical services and analytics of big data.*



**Pros:** Large consulting firms can be beneficial because of their bigger pool of resources, which may lead to team support for clients, which can be an advantage. Also, they may offer strong technical expertise and insight on developing strategies for implementing a program, especially with regard to cost efficiency.

**Cons:** Services from large consulting firms can be costly, although they may have special non-profit rates and some may offer pro-bono work. Also, national firms have multiple geographic locations but if they are not located in your area they will need to travel to your site, which becomes an embedded cost for the project. Furthermore, this means much of the work will occur virtually, which may require more oversight by the client. Finally, if you are looking for consultants that are knowledgeable about hunger, poverty, and other related topics, then it is important to do your research. There are few large firms that have in-depth knowledge in the areas of food insecurity as related to poverty, etc. but firms that serve large non-governmental agencies (World Food Programme, UNICEF, etc.) or governmental agencies (United States Department of Agriculture) are the exception; additionally some large firms specialize in research on policy topics and may have research specialists with subject matter expertise.

## 3. Small or Boutique Consulting Firm



*The number of small/boutique consulting firms continue to grow and are typically started or owned by partner(s) who have significant professional experiences in select fields, such as research.*

**Pros:** Unlike large consulting firms, boutique consulting firms must be more selective with projects because they have less capacity, so one benefit is that the projects they lead may be given a high level of dedicated attention. Boutique firms also offer a specific set of services based on the skills, knowledge, network, and experience of their employees, which means that they may offer subject matter experts. Comparatively, costs may be lower than a larger firm, but not always.

**Cons:** It is important to review the firm’s services and previous clients to determine if program evaluation is an area of specialty. Oftentimes boutique firms that offer research and program evaluation services will have staff on board who have related experiences such as the design and execution of a program evaluation or research project, conducting community level research, and managing and analyzing data sets. Finally, they are more likely to serve a particular local area or region, although they may be willing to travel and work on-site; however, keep in mind that travel always adds costs.



## 4. Independent Evaluators

*Independent evaluators tend to be more flexible and have a set of specialized skills and knowledge.*

**Pros:** Independent evaluators will typically be subject matter experts. Independent evaluators are typically accustomed to working with a diverse set of clients too. If they have been an independent consultant for a few years then they should be adept at facilitating conversations with nonprofits, giving honest feedback about a project plan and feasibility, and following a set of protocols and professional standards. Also, many consultants will have an affiliation with a local chapter of a professional organization or university. Finally, their contractual costs/rates may be lower because they are local and they are in a competitive market.

**Cons:** Independent evaluators who are subject matter experts may also be limited by their own expertise, meaning that they may or may not be familiar with food bank operations. It is important to assess prior projects they have completed by simply asking for a list and for references you can contact to verify they produced satisfactory work. Also, they may work alone and may not have other staff resources, but this doesn't mean they are not managing more than one contract simultaneously. Finally, independent consultants may have strength in either quantitative or qualitative skills, or both. *Quantitative skills* will be used to perform statistical modeling on data that has numerical value. In comparison, strong *qualitative skills* would be used to collect data without numerical value, such as interview data, but this data can be equally critical. Overall, independent evaluators will operate like consultants in any of other settings but they are not held accountable to the culture and management of a firm.

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## Common Questions and Answers

### ***How can I prepare for an external evaluator at my food bank?***

- *Formulate a project plan*, even in draft format, of how you envision the project being executed, including costs, time, and resources available to internally manage the project.
- *Formulate a couple of evaluation questions*. It is helpful when you are able to articulate what you would like to learn. Then an external evaluator can give more feedback on whether or not, given your project plan, the program evaluation is feasible.
- *Gather any previous evaluation work as well as program documents* that can be shared with the evaluator to inform them about your food bank programs.

### ***How do I find a program evaluator?***

- *Word of Mouth*- Ask other food banks or local organizations in your area.
- Many cities have local evaluation chapters and organizations for evaluation professionals.
- *Local colleges and universities* have research departments with program evaluators or sometimes program evaluation centers. They may recommend evaluators.
- A national or regional conference that attracts researchers could be good opportunity.

### ***What should I expect from an external evaluator during the project?***

- *If you hire an external evaluator, be wary of relying too much on the evaluator* to determine the project scope otherwise conflict of interest may arise.
- *Communication is very important*, so discuss early on how often you think you will need to meet with the evaluator in person vs. email or phone. Oftentimes an evaluation is frontloaded requiring a lot of time and communication to determine the scope, and collect data and information. The food bank should be an active participant in the process.
- *You can negotiate with external evaluators*. For instance, if a full-length report is not what you want, then you can determine whether or not the final report comes in a different format such as a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, or a stakeholder meeting, or a webinar, or an 8-page summary with key charts and tables.
- *The project plan is the reference document for the entirety of the project*. The evaluator should adhere to this plan and if there are changes then the plan should be amended.