Measuring impact: how long is a piece of string?

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Academic research paper (working)

Objectives

- To consider the impact of publicly funded business support business support programmes in terms of funding bodies, beneficiaries, grant holder and delivery team.
- To test project logic models as a mechanism for predicting and monitoring impact.
- To explore how knowledge gained during the delivery of projects may be fed back to influence future public policy.

Approach and methodology

The paper explores the experience of Design Knowledge Network (DKN), a project attempting to increase innovation in SMEs in the West Midlands, UK, primarily through the application of design. The project was partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund and regional development agency Advantage West Midlands and ran from 2003 to 2008.

The project devised and delivered a number of services including initial research and SWOT; market research; market planning; competitor analysis; product analysis; prospect search; design audit; design process and management; and other services as required. The intervention, totalling five days, usually comprised business research and analysis, presented in the form of a report. These are described in more detail by Burns and Ingram (2008). Assisted companies were mainly in high value added consumer products markets including furniture, jewellery, giftware, clothing and textiles. Over five years DKN helped nearly 70 companies and provided 180 five-day assistances.

The paper considers impact from the perspective of different interest groups, ie, funding authorities, beneficiaries, grant holder and delivery team for this particular project.

Having established impact from different perspectives, the project is considered in terms of the project logic model, see for example AHRC (2007). These comprise a number of stages:

Resources/inputs $\implies$ activities $\implies$ outputs $\implies$ outcomes $\implies$ impact

where:

- resources are what is needed to achieve the project's aims and objectives
- activities are the things to be done to address the aims and objectives
- outputs are the products that will be delivered by the activities
- outcomes are the changes in knowledge, skills and behaviour that the activities will lead to
- impact is the fundamental changes in service, organisation or community that will result from the activities

Since DKN was formed, project logic models have become more widely used as a means of predicting the impact of a project and linking ultimate outcomes and impact to original objectives. The paper investigates how the model could have been applied to DKN and assesses its practicality and efficacy using the completed project as a basis.

Results

Impact has different meanings to different parties depending on their interest in a project. For funding bodies, impact tends to be quantified through hard measures such as businesses assisted, jobs created and new sales generated. For beneficiaries, impact will be also seen in similar financial terms, but may also include softer outcomes, for example, finding new markets or introducing new processes. For the grant holder, in this case a university, there is again a financial aspect to impact, but outcomes also include academic research, strengthening the employer engagement agenda, publicity and feedback into the curriculum and student projects. Finally, the impact of the delivery team includes skills and personal development, satisfaction from helping companies to improve, a record of publications and being part of a collaborative network.

In effect the project logic model for a project will vary according to the viewpoint of the perpetrator. Since impact has different measures depending on the relationship with the project, then the issues to be addressed and all following aspects of the model will vary. However, the model does provide a useful basis for articulating possible project outcomes and impact at the start of a project and also provides a means of testing the proposed project activities prior to their development.

Implications and recommendations

Implicit in structural funding programmes is a number of assumptions:

- The notion that companies can be improved quickly and easily by the provision of the right services. Successful funding applicants need only to establish a sector's needs, devise appropriate assistance and services to address those needs.
- There is a body of willing companies ready to take advantage and implement the assistance to effect lasting and positive change.
- Beneficiary companies are capable and have the capacity to make changes.
- The link between the service provided by the project to a measurable benefit, such as new sales or jobs is easy to evaluate and articulate.

The experiences of DKN show that this is not necessarily the case. In particular, it is often difficult to link the original assistance to the outcomes and changes in a company. With the passage of time, a company can undervalue the original impetus for change and overrate its own input.

The lessons learned in regional schemes are difficult to promote beyond the boundaries. As a result, money is spent on reinventing the wheel, not refining experience to provide improved services. Best practice is not being collated due to a focus on new sales, new jobs, not on processes involved. Further, while there are not clear measures of impact, it is not easy to compare projects methodologies and approaches to clearly define lessons learned and spread best practice.

It is recommended, as below, that this shortcoming is addressed through a research project.

Areas for development / further research

In terms of the paper, I would like to do a better literature search in terms of the meaning and measurement of impact and make a comparison with existing findings.

In the longer term, there is a need to capture experiences from a number of projects. Undertaking a compare and contrast exercise could then lead to the realisation of proven models for knowledge exchange as well as a reasoned argument to develop future public policy.

References

AHRC (2007) *Understanding your project: a guide to self evaluation* Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council, downloaded from http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundedResearch/Pages/SelfEvaluation.aspx accessed 30 January 2011

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