

Several lessons were learned through this project that can be implemented in future evaluation projects.

Background

A community-based evaluation of ISANS' response to COVID-19 began in October 2020. A Project Steering Committee, consisting of Senior Leadership, Team Leads, Managers, and a partner from the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration, was formed. The research team met with the Project Steering Committee bi-weekly to update them on the progress of the project, to ask questions, and to receive guidance, input, and feedback. A plan for quantitative and qualitative data collection was determined to include document analysis, the ISANS database, surveys, focus groups, email correspondence with key leaders and managers, and a targeted interview with the CEO of the organization. Data collection was carried out between November 2020 and March 2021.

Benefit from Local Knowledge

Understanding the local community provided context for the research team. Having this pre-existing local knowledge and an understanding of the organization's local culture made the evaluation process go faster. Local knowledge of the following topics is beneficial for an evaluation project:

- ISANS
- Halifax
- Nova Scotia

Collaboration Improves Quality

Insight into the organization's operations was achieved by using an embedded evaluation strategy as one of ISANS' Senior Leaders was part of the research team. Using an embedded strategy also resulted in access to additional data that helped to provide a picture of pandemic operations, and the research team was informed of data collection occurring at ISANS that could benefit the evaluation project. The following instances of collaboration improved the quality of the evaluation:

- Collaboration with ISANS' Evaluation Framework Advisory Group occurred because a member of the advisory group was also a member of the research team
- Access to Connect, ISANS' intranet system which contains data on operations before and during COVID-19, was given to the research team
- Collaboration with the Project Steering Committee enabled the research team to gain access to survey data and photographs that were not directly collected for the evaluation project

Importance of an Iterative Approach

Consultation with the Project Steering Committee during the six-month-long project was constant and possible because of the project's iterative approach. Lessons that were learned from using an iterative approach included:

- Feedback from the Project Steering Committee was continuous, which ensured that the project continued in the right direction and prioritized topics that were important to ISANS
- Products of the evaluation project were shaped by the feedback of stakeholders such as Frontline Staff, Managers, the Senior Leadership Team, ISANS' CEO, and partners. This helped to ensure that products of the project reflected the diverse experiences across ISANS
- Consultations with the Project Steering Committee were as important as the products of the evaluation project because it prompted conversations about best practices during and after the pandemic

Openness to Unplanned Sources

Openness to additional, unplanned sources of data while completing an evaluation project can help to enhance the scope and detail of an evaluation. Some examples of unplanned sources of data include:

- Data collected from surveys that were not conducted for the evaluation project
- Crowdsourcing within ISANS to obtain a specific type of data (e.g., photographs)
- Research that has been published recently