



GUIDED EXPERT REVIEWS

Purpose

The purpose of conducting guided expert reviews is to gain informed perspectives from valued experts who are outside the system (for example, education system, transportation system, and so on) on which the needs assessment is focused.

Needs Assessment Applications

Under certain circumstances, you or others associated with the needs assessment can be too familiar (or too unfamiliar) with the processes, procedures, people, tools, resources, performance data, or other variables that influence either current or desired performance to be able to adequately complete a needs assessment. In this situation, reviews by experts (for example, public financial management experts, environmental engineers, organizational development specialists, and so on) provide valuable external perspectives that can inform your decisions.

You should also use expert reviews to provide balanced perspectives when there are even minimal possibilities of internal predisposition or bias that could influence any needs assessment processes or stages. The expert reviews may include collecting data, analyzing information, reporting findings, and conducting other activities that lead to program or project recommendations.

In your needs assessments, guided expert reviews can provide external perspectives on the following:

- Needs (that is, the performance gaps that are the focus of decisions to be made)

- Decisions (that is, the results and recommendations of the assessment itself)

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Expert reviews allow you to have a fresh set of eyes that can provide new ideas and insights that might not have come about without the expert's participation.
- The involvement of expert reviewers in the needs assessment process can increase the credibility of the assessment process and findings, thereby potentially increasing stakeholder buy-in.
- The use of expert reviews may allow you to pursue strategies and approaches that make inherent sense for the context in which you may be working but that you might not normally pursue if you did not have the assurance of the expert's careful review.
- Because experts generally bring insights and experiences from other (outside) contexts in which they have worked, the involvement of an expert in the needs assessment may make it possible for you to formally or informally benchmark against other, similar systems or contexts.
- Expert reviews, especially those focused on documents or data files, can often be done at a distance, thereby saving time and resources. For example, you may want expert review performance data to confirm your conclusions, or you may request a review of a pending project proposal; in either case, you could likely e-mail the relevant files or provide access to online databases.

Disadvantages

- It can be a challenge to identify reliable criteria (such as years of development experience, particular technology knowledge, work with specific at-risk populations, and so forth) for selecting experts to involve in the expert review process.
- If the context in which the needs assessment is being conducted is significantly different from the one in which the expert normally works, the extent to which the expert's observations and recommendations are relevant can be diminished.

- As is the case for any other individual, an expert’s subjectivity and prior experience may affect the outcome of the expert review process (the effect of this expertise can potentially be mitigated somewhat through the involvement of more than one expert).
- Soliciting insight from experts can be expensive, and it may be difficult to find experts who are able to contribute large amounts of time responding (particularly if the area of expertise is one for which there is high demand).

Process Overview

Getting Started

1. Identify either a need (a gap between current and desired results) or a needs assessment decision (such as prioritizing needs or determining which mix of improvement activities or interventions will work best within your organization) that will be the focus of the guided expert review.
2. Determine what type of expert review you would like the expert to conduct, such as a peer, relevance, or benchmarking review. (a) A *peer review* involves judging the quality of something. For instance, a peer review could involve engaging a public-private sector development expert to assess the quality of a plan developed by a community and its business leaders to help them to address economic development issues for the community. (b) A *relevance review* judges whether an organization’s activities are relevant to its mission. An example of a relevance review is when an organizational development specialist works with an organization and engages its stakeholders—management, employees, clients, and others—to understand the strategy of the organization and when the specialist offers an assessment on what could be changed, such as what activities the organization should and should not be doing to meet the goals of the strategy. (c) A *benchmarking review* involves judging the relative standing in an international, regional, sector, or other perspective. For instance, benchmarking reviews assess property rights across countries, thus allowing countries to compare their relative performance.

Finding Experts

Following are some considerations that are relevant when bringing experts on board for an expert review:

1. Generate a protocol (guide) for identifying appropriate experts to invite for the expert review process.
 - This protocol should be based on your understanding of the goals of your needs assessment, as well as the specific context in which the organization functions.
 - Carefully identify the skills and knowledge that someone should possess to be able to meaningfully function as an expert reviewer for the needs assessment, and include those competencies in the protocol.
 - Apply the protocol as you search for potential experts.
2. Identify potential experts from *outside* the system to participate in the review.
 - Experts can be from within the organization (but outside of the unit or division that is the focus of the needs assessment).
 - Or they can be from outside the organization when they have expertise with the performance system or similar such systems.
3. Determine whether you would like experts to be invited as individuals or as teams.
4. Determine whether you would like local or international experts or a combination of both. Consider carefully the benefits and drawbacks of involving experts from other countries. Example benefits and drawbacks include the following:
 - An advantage of involving international experts may be that they bring dynamic new insights to the situation and that they are able to size up the organization's relative standing from an international perspective.
 - A drawback may be that the international expert's ability to leverage his or her expertise may be limited if that expert has no familiarity with the local country context.
 - In some developing country contexts, there may be relatively modest capacity in certain areas of economic productivity, and it may thus be advisable to invite international experts to participate.
 - In many instances, using both local and international experts may provide a mix of the "best of both worlds."
5. As you begin to invite experts, find out about their availability during the time period for the expert review. Because they *are* experts, it is likely

that they are in demand elsewhere too, so you may have to do some creative planning to work around scheduling restrictions while still meeting the goals of an expert review. For instance, if a given expert is not available to come onsite, determine if he or she can review other documentation and reports to give you quality input at a distance (for example, using audio or video conferences).

6. Present the potential experts with unbiased background information on the purpose of their involvement in the needs assessment, and ask each potential expert to evaluate his or her experience and knowledge relative to the specific goals for your needs assessment.

Planning and Conducting the Expert Review

1. Define your objectives for the expert review (or what results you expect to accomplish by the time the review is complete). Be realistic about what objectives can be accomplished. Determine when it is appropriate to use each expert, knowing what they can and cannot do given the constraints of the situation.
2. Generate terms of reference (that is, a scope of work) that can be used by experts prior to arriving on site. Doing so will allow experts to arrive prepared for the task, including giving them time to locate any hard-to-find materials that they may want to consult during the review process.
3. Contact each expert reviewer, and make arrangements for his or her participation. As noted previously, if one or more experts are not available for in-person participation, make arrangements to send relevant documentation that will allow the expert(s) to contribute at a distance.
4. Inform stakeholders and participants of the role of expert reviewer(s).
5. Consider providing metrics or protocols that the experts can use during the expert review. Such metrics or protocols can be valuable in increasing the objectivity and transparency of an expert review process, and they can also increase the chances that the expert review results are aligned with the objectives you defined at the beginning of the process.
6. Collect the necessary background information for each expert reviewer. This information may be valuable later if you have to justify decisions made during the needs assessment.
7. Be sure to include specific deliverables for each reviewer and for each context in which the review is to take place. For instance, do you expect a

written report at the conclusion of each review, or will reviewers be expected to present their findings during a presentation?

Tips for Success

- Develop and maintain a list or inventory of program review experts (especially for larger-scale efforts) to be used for subsequent expert review needs.
- Arrange logistics and provide onsite meeting support. Provide translation and interpretation services, as needed, when engaging international experts.
- Provide experts with specific guidelines or questions that should be used to guide the expert review process.
- Watch out for experts who may have an agenda of their own in completing the review (for example, making recommendations so they can gain future consulting contracts with your organization).
- If you are inviting experts from outside contexts, equip them with some information that will give them insight into the context in which the expert review will take place. This approach is especially important if experts are being invited from foreign countries where cultural and business practices may be significantly different from the context in which your needs assessment is being conducted.
- To the extent possible, schedule the onsite expert's review process during a time when the organization is otherwise functioning in a generally normal way. Scheduling the review process at this time increases the chances that the review will yield relevant results, and it also ensures that others in the organization are not negatively affected by the presence of outside experts.
- Prepare reports on the results of each review. In the reports, identify the relationship of the expert's review to the needs assessment, the goal of the specific expert review, the competencies or expertise of the expert or expert team, the type of expert review conducted, the findings from the expert review, and the potential implications of the findings for the needs assessment.