

Points for Consideration Observations

Overview:

- 1) Important where it is not the event that is of interest, but rather how that event may fit into, or be impacted by, a sequence of events
- 2) Allow the evaluator to learn about things the participants or staff may be unaware of or that they are unwilling or unable to discuss in an interview or focus group
- 3) Observations can be useful during both the formative and summative phases of evaluation

Recording Observational Data:

- 1) Observations are carried out using a carefully developed set of steps and instruments, sometimes called the protocol (e.g. printed forms, checklists, field notes, pictures)
- 2) The protocol goes beyond a recording of events, i.e., use of identified materials, and provides an overall context for the data. The protocol should prompt the observer to:
 - a) Describe the setting of program delivery, i.e., where the observation took place and what the physical setting was like;
 - b) Identify the people who participated in those activities, i.e., characteristics of those who were present;
 - c) Describe the content of the intervention, i.e., actual activities and messages that were delivered;
 - d) Document the interactions between implementation staff and project participants;
 - e) Describe and assess the quality of the delivery of the intervention; and
 - f) Be alert to unanticipated events that might require refocusing one or more evaluation questions
- 3) The use of technological tools, such as digital voice recorder or dictaphone, laptop computer, camera, and video camera, can make the collection of field notes more efficient and the notes themselves more comprehensive

The Role of the Observer:

- 1) The most fundamental distinction between various observational strategies concerns the extent to which the observer will be a participant in the setting being studied. The extent of participation is a continuum that varies from complete involvement in the setting as a full participant to complete separation from the setting as an outside observer or spectator. In addition to the evaluator, observers can be participants, stakeholders, colleagues, volunteers
- 2) In some cases it may be beneficial to have two people observing at the same time. This can increase the quality of the data by providing a larger volume of data and by decreasing the influence of observer bias.



- 3) While most people agree that one observation (a single hour of a training session or one class period of instruction) is not enough, there is no hard and fast rule regarding how many samples need to be drawn. General tips to consider are to avoid atypical situations, carry out observations more than one time, and (where possible and relevant) spread the observations out over time.
- 4) Informed consent must be obtained from participants before any observational data are gathered.
- 5) Observational techniques are perhaps the most privacy-threatening data collection technique for staff and, to a lesser extent, participants; Staff may equate with performance appraisal, and participants, or their program managers, may feel that they are being observed too much.

References:

- [1] Module 3: Qualitative Research Methods of Data Collection and Analysis.
<http://www.personal.rdg.ac.uk/~emsbreny/qualmeth.html> ; Accessed 1-11-2005
- [2] Collecting Evaluation Data: Direct Observation, UWEX Bulletin 3658-5, by Ellen Taylor-Powell & Sara Steele, 1996, 8 page pdf www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande

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