Evaluation Firm Support Guidance Document

PURPOSE

This document is intended to be a practical guide for nonprofit and social impact organizations seeking a full-service evaluation firm to support their data-driven decision-making and reporting. This document is not intended to provide legal advice or guidance.

Use Case

- You are seeking evaluation support and are considering engaging a full-service evaluation firm.
- You want to understand how this model is similar to and different from working with individual consultants or building internal capacity.
- You are preparing to hire a firm and want to ensure you are structuring the engagement effectively.

ABOUT BSRI

BSRI was created to support informed and effective decision-making for our partners with tools, resources, and data for action. As we wind down operations, we are creating these resources for the community to continue the work. We use our guiding principles in engaging with partners and communities, putting people first through accountability and reciprocity, communicating transparently, and sharing our knowledge widely.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

BSRI developed this guidance based on our experience supporting partners across multiple evaluation models, including internal capacity building, consultant networks, and full-service firm engagements. Engaging a full-service firm can be one of the most effective ways to ensure consistency, quality, and strategic alignment in evaluation work, but success depends on clarity, partnership, and thoughtful planning. This document is designed to help organizations approach this model with confidence by outlining key considerations, benefits, risks, and implementation steps.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Our organization utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance efficiency, support data analysis, and strengthen evaluation practices. We also encourage our partners and clients to thoughtfully explore AI as a means to build future-ready evaluation capacity.All AI use is governed by strict data privacy and ethical standards. We do not input any personally identifiable information (PII), protected health information (PHI), or other sensitive data into AI systems in a manner that would violate HIPAA or other applicable privacy regulations.

Additionally, we exclusively use licensed AI tools and platforms that explicitly prohibit the use of submitted data for model training or retention beyond the scope of the intended task. This ensures that all information remains confidential, secure, and protected.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Engaging a full-service evaluation firm centralizes research and evaluation functions under a single partner and contract. This model emphasizes continuity, alignment, and long-term partnership, and is often selected by organizations seeking a more integrated and less administratively complex approach. Keep in mind that

Benefits	Considerations
• Reduced administrative burden (single contract and point of contact) • Consistency in methodology, reporting, and deliverables • Unified strategic and analytical voice • Ability to scale services up or down over time • Stronger long-term relationship and institutional knowledge development	• Higher upfront or ongoing cost compared to individual consultants • Less flexibility to swap out specific expertise quickly • Requires strong upfront alignment to ensure the firm's approach matches organizational needs and values • Potential for over-reliance if internal capacity is not developed in parallel

While engaging a full-service firm can streamline operations, it is important to approach the relationship as a partnership rather than a transactional vendor arrangement. Successful engagements are grounded in shared accountability, transparent communication, and mutual respect. Organizations should remain actively engaged, provide timely input and feedback, and collaborate with the firm to ensure that evaluation work reflects both technical rigor and organizational context.

Organizational Self-Assessment

Organizations may benefit from engaging a full-service firm when they:

- Want consistency across multiple projects or funding streams
- Prefer a single partner to manage complex evaluation functions
- Need strategic guidance alongside technical execution
- Have limited internal capacity to coordinate multiple consultants
- Value long-term partnership and institutional knowledge retention

This model is particularly useful for organizations seeking to move beyond compliance and toward learning, strategy, and impact-driven evaluation. Before pursuing this model, organizations should assess whether they have the internal infrastructure to support it. The following checklist can serve as a green light to move ahead.

We have...

- A designated internal point of contact to manage the relationship
- Leadership alignment on the value of evaluation
- Clarity on high-level goals and priorities
- Internal team clarity on how the firm will be integrated and complementary
- Capacity to engage in regular communication and feedback cycles
- Willingness to collaborate and co-create with an external partner engagement.

If you can answer "yes" to the checklist above, the following steps can help support your organization in the successful engagement of a full-service firm.

Key Difference: Firms versus Consultants

Contracting an evaluation firm is often a long-term strategic investment in developing your organization into one that prioritizes data in decision-making and in building teams and processes to strengthen impact. It is not a "hand-off" of data or information to produce a series of reports. This partnership requires more resources up front, but the expectation is in deeper change that will position your organization to engage deeper in programs and in business development.

Steps to Engage a Full-Service Evaluation Firm

1. **Clarify your organization's evaluation needs**

Identify the scope and purpose of evaluation support. For example, are your needs focused on a single project, or multiple initiatives? Consider your organizational staffing - what are your current capabilities vs. gaps? Finally, what are you ultimately looking for? Are you seeking compliance support, strategic learning, or both?

Pro Tip
Consider how evaluation will inform decision-making and longer-term structural changes at your organization rather than simply focusing on the "tasks" or "deliverables" needed.

2. Establish the budget

Determine the funding source for the scope of services and whether the funding is project-specific or ongoing. Align expectations between the desired scope and available resources across multiple departments or agency-wide. Recognize the partnership will be most beneficial if it is at an organizational, rather than departmental level.

Once you have your internal budget in mind, do your own research on evaluation firm rates through asking your network and through internet searches. Your organization's reputation is at stake any time you hire a consultancy, so you will want to ensure equitable, fair compensation aligned with expertise, scope, and lived experience. Cost savings should never come at the expense of quality or fairness.

3. Identify and vet evaluation firms

Evaluation skill sets are broad and encompass a wide range of fields and expertise (e.g., federal grant experience, statistical analysis, data infrastructure). If you have clarity on the scope (step 1) and the budget (step 2), you can begin searching for a firm most likely to fulfill these needs. Some websites, such as the American Evaluation Association, have evaluator directories by State. You can also put the word out through your social media/LinkedIn, or other professional networking sites.

If these options do not seem realistic or you are not identifying any potential "fits", you may opt to issue a Request for Proposals or a Request for Qualifications that firms can respond to. This is a time-consuming endeavor (drafting the RFP/RFQ, managing the submission process, reviewing and scoring the proposals), but it may be better at aggregating a larger number of potential candidates and may be required for some government funding.

Once you have selected one or more firms, review past work samples and relevant experience. Check references and have conversations with former clients to gain a deeper understanding of their communication styles, values, and cultural fit with your organization. You will need to weigh the evaluation firm's approach, values and community/working style against your own organization's needs and priorities. You may even need to train or "orient" their team to your approach to internal and external working relationships to seamlessly maintain psychologically safe environments for all staff.

Look for firms with:

- Demonstrated experience in your content area
- Strong methodological expertise
- Clear communication and project management processes
- Values alignment
- Approach to collaboration and stakeholder engagement
- Cultural responsiveness

Pro Tip
Conduct a "vibe check", as this relationship will likely be ongoing.

4. Formalize the Engagement

An explicit and clear scope of work is a necessary requirement for a successful engagement. At a minimum, you should:

- Clearly define deliverables (report, presentation, portal submission)
- Clearly list the timelines for all deliverables, including interim steps (e.g., outline, report draft)
- Establish the payment and tracking structure (e.g., hourly vs. fixed deliverables) and if hourly, how time will be tracked
- Set a regular check-in cadence (e.g., weekly or biweekly check-ins). It is often helpful to meet more frequently at the beginning of the engagement (e.g., biweekly) while trust is being built.
- Establish parameters and guidance around data ownership and confidentiality.

Ensure both parties have a shared understanding of scope, quality, and timelines before finalizing agreements. Clarity at this stage is critical as it sets the tone for the relationship.

5. Formalize onboarding

Once the scope of work is finalized, execute the formal contract. Keep in mind that the scope of work language is often separate from your organization's standard contract language, although there may be some overlap (e.g., confidentiality or data security). Contract clauses often include more legal specifications. Discuss these as needed with the firm. Other onboarding tasks include:

- Introduce the evaluation firm to the project team or any clients they will be working with. Use this time to convey organizational context and goals, and how the specific project or needs fit into the bigger picture.
  - Clarify if there are multiple individuals from the firm who will have direct communication with your organization. What are individuals' roles? Who are fiscal/administrative point people? Who is the main point of contact?
- Provide access to relevant data, systems, and materials.
- Clarify confidentiality requirements, including within the use of Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models, if needed.
- Set communication norms, protocols, pathways for bi-directional feedback, and response time expectations (e.g., email, text, office phone)
- Clarify decision-making structures within the organization as they relate to the consultant's work and tasks, including who has a "final approval"
- Establish a plan for addressing performance concerns or misalignment during the engagement. This should also translate to language included in the signed contract that allows your organization OR the consultant to discontinue services if expectations aer not being met.

6. Manage the Partnership

Effectively managing a full service firm requires some degree of project management infrastructure that supports both parties in tracking/documenting progress towards milestones as established in the scope of work, without feeling burdensome. Clear folder structures and shared document protocols support this, as do time-tracking systems, communication channels, and structures. Having a designated point person to oversee the firm's progress through a project-based lens (e.g., not solely on time/budget) is essential, as regular reviews of outputs support quality control and provide feedback loops for ongoing course correction. If strategic insights are a goal of the evaluation firm relationship, frequent check-ins with leadership will need to be a priority. Finally, managing the partnership includes creating space for candid conversations to strengthen trust building and advance clarity on mutual goals and new collaboration opportunities.

7. **Closeout and Continuity**

Logistical steps to close out the engagement include the final review and approval of deliverables, and final payment/invoice approval and processing. Additional considerations may include removing access to confidential documents or systems (e.g., SharePoint or Google Drive folders) and reiterating or clarifying whether work products created under the scope of work can be used as samples for the consultant in the future. Having a brief closeout conversation to capture lessons learned from the evaluation firm lens can also support your organization in future successful consulting engagements. Consider how future scopes or rates may differ based on what you learned. Finally, consider evaluation firm documentation, training, and internal capacity buyilding for your staff and organization. This can reduce your organization's future reliance on a firm and supports sustainability beyond the initial engagement. It may even be embedded in the evaluation firm's mission statement.

Ideally, the closeout process with an evaluation firm is temporary and the relationship strength will support both parties in ongoing communication and planning for new partnership opportunities and/or funding. Once trust is firmly established, firms can also tap into their strategic networks to support broader organizational needs and a stronger social impact sector.

Common Risks and How to Mitigate Them

Insights from BSRI's strategic planning highlight that organizations often face challenges when evaluation is under-resourced or unclear.

Risk: Over-reliance on the evaluation firm
Mitigation: Build internal understanding and ownership alongside the partnership
Risk: Misalignment on expectations
Mitigation: Invest time upfront in defining scope, roles, and success
Risk: Passive engagement
Mitigation: Maintain active communication and feedback loops through pre-scheduled check-ins
Risk: Treating evaluation as compliance-only
Mitigation: Engage the firm as a strategic partner, not just a reporting function

Risk: Breakdown in communication or trust from firm OR from internal team

Mitigation: Establish clear communication norms, regular check-ins, and shared expectations for feedback and responsiveness

Final Considerations

Engaging a full-service evaluation firm can be a highly effective and strategic approach when managed well. Success depends on both the quality and capacity of the firm itself and on the organization's ability to:

- Clearly define needs
- Establish strong partnership expectations
- Stay actively engaged in the work
- Use findings to inform action and decision-making

When done well, these partnerships move evaluation beyond reporting and into **learning, strategy, and impact.**