

The 80/20 Rule.

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Michael Quinn Patton

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Marvin C. Alkin and Christina Christie, Series Editors

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Facilitating Major Decisions

An evaluation can involve many methods, measurement, and design decisions. How many such decisions to bring before a group, and which ones they should deliberate, involves judgment about which options will be appropriately decided by the group. I find the 80/20 rule instructive in this regard. The 80/20 rule (also known as the Pareto principle or the law of the vital few) states that for most interventions, roughly 80% of the outcomes stem from 20% of the effort. Correspondingly, 80% of what matters flows from 20% of the decisions made. Well-documented examples of the 80/20 rule include 20% of employees generate 80% of a company's output; 20% of customers are responsible for 80% of a business's revenues; 80% of the clothes you wear are from 20% of what you own; you spend 80% of your time in 20% of your house; you make 80% of your phone calls to 20% of the people in your phone list; you spend most of your money on a few major items; and so forth (Koch, 1999). The 80/20 ratio is not precise; it's a framework of proportionality rather than a precise calculus. But its implications are powerful in many arenas of prioritizing, including facilitation. It is the job of the evaluation facilitator to engage the group in the most influential, understandable, and utility-enhancing trade-offs and methods decisions. Examples include interviews versus questionnaires, a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, target levels in key indicators that constitute success or failure, length of time for follow-up to determine sustained impact on key outcomes, and what background variables to include in analyzing and comparing differential outcomes among subgroups (e.g., gender, race, age).

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1. *Respect and apply the 80/20 rule.* Evaluation facilitators have a responsibility to help stakeholders identify those vital few questions among the trivial many that are high in payoff and add real value to the evaluation's utility. The 80/20 rule expresses the importance of focusing on the right information: In general, 20% of the information obtained accounts for 80% of what's worth knowing (Koch, 2014). The trick is identifying and focusing on that critical 20%. Many questions are interesting, but which are crucial?

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Attend to the 80/20 principle. Roughly 20% of any distribution accounts for 80% of its power or impact. Thus, 80% of what is important will flow from 20% of the activity undertaken. "Truly effective people and organizations batten onto the few powerful forces at work in their worlds, and turn them to their advantage" (Koch, 2014, p. 218). The problem is you can't know which 20% is most important ahead of time or even during a process, so you have to act as if any given effort could be that critical 20% that yields 80%. Corollary aphorisms that flow from the 80/20 principle: Less is more. And rule of the vital few: The key quest is to isolate the vital few causes of anything as opposed to the trivial many. "The 80/20 principle is one of the most universal. It seems to apply to almost anything. It is built into the fabric of the universe. . . . It is how the universe works and progress occurs" (Koch, 2014, p. 220).

References

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