



Book Review: With all of our Hearts: Demand-Driven Learning in International Development Sector

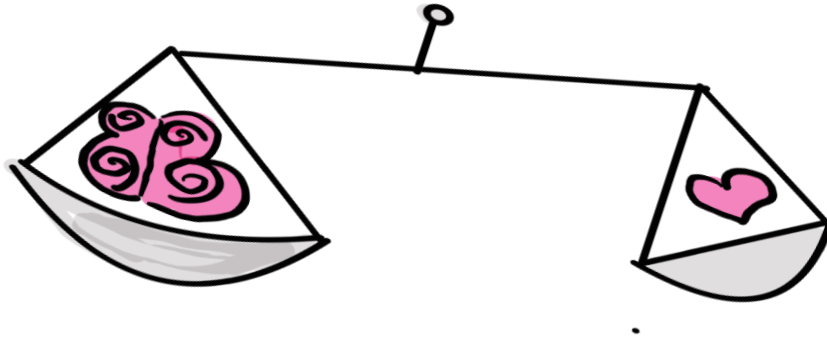
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Review: *With all of our Hearts: Demand-Driven Learning in International Development Sector*.
Abbie Cohen, Diar, Ramandani and Malaika Cheney-Coker. Ignited World LLC.

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Key findings at a glance

This report starts with a premise that members of the TWP CoP likely agree with: that **learning is central to address complex development challenges**. The report focuses on the people who are expected to lead on learning in development organisations.

It adds interesting data by analysing job descriptions of 19 recent job postings for Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) specialists and 60 postings for evaluation consultants published in Devex, LinkedIn, and EvalCommunity as a proxy for organisational learning priorities, and complements this with interviews and consultations with other experts.

The report concludes that, in the international development field, many organisations are not only “talking the talk” but also “walking the walk” on learning, and this goes beyond the number of well-known examples that are usually showcased. Yet, there is still a long way to go to make learning an internal driving force in practice. There seems to be a substantial disconnect between i) the skills that are needed to enable internal learning and reflection,

and those highlighted in the job postings; and ii) there is very little clear and explicit emphasis on the need to foster an organisational culture that encourages learning.

Putting findings and recommendations in context

The report's data collection and analysis open the possibility to go deeper into other issues that deserve attention:

Soft skills

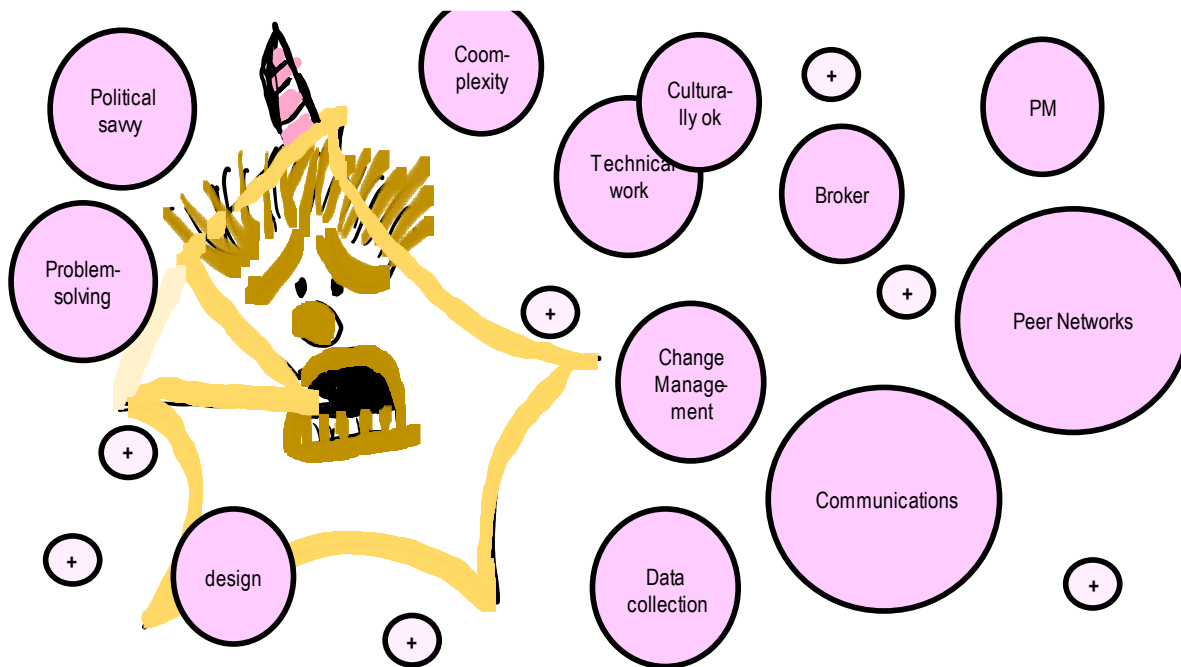
According to the authors, soft skills – including experience and expertise facilitating learning, capacity building, innovation, adaptability, enhancing participation, influencing others, managing change, finding creative solutions, and building partnerships across teams and organisations -- are critical to manage MEL activities, processes, and systems. These . resonate with USAID Learning Lab's focus on curiosity, communication and listening skills, critical thinking and comfort with uncertainty and change to enable [adaptive management](#) (also [here](#)). Other desired qualifications are near and dear to the TWP community as well, such as the ability to uncover and navigate complex, non-linear change, unequal power relations, structures, and norms, experience with gender analysis, political economy analysis and programmes' theories of change.

Yet, looking at the qualifications sections in job descriptions, it appears that development organisations do not signal explicitly that they will hire people with these kinds of skills. Instead, from the sample the authors looked at, most applicant requirements/qualifications remain focused on traditional M&E and project management skills (e.g. software competencies; experience with data collection, research, and analysis; and communication/reporting skills). The report does not make suggestions on possible ideas to craft job postings that are more responsive to learning needs, but this is something that USAID's [Monalisa Salib](#) has been thinking about. According to her, the posting may signal that the following competencies: taking and managing risk, political acumen and/or decision quality, among others. Her guidance includes definitions, guidance to prioritize which

competencies are relevant for different roles as well as questions that might be asked in a job interview.

In addition to job postings, *With all of our Hearts* investigated a few “positive deviants” which provide another important clue about the type of MEL staff organisations should hire. The report argues that [intrinsically motivated](#) mavericks (individuals or team) who can advance change against the odds without the need of external incentives seem to be critical to ensure “positive deviants” not only talk the talk but also walk the walk. Shall we call them [mission-driven staff](#) and consultants? I would also call them jugglers because the picture below only covers some of [the ways in which they spend time at work](#) and the skillsets they need:

MEL Jugglers at Work



Source: Own construction

The authors argue that those tasked with mission-driven MEL ‘juggling’ require not only strategic and technical brains, but also emotional intelligence and the opportunity to nurture relationships. While acknowledging that there isn't necessarily a trade-off between emotional intelligence and other forms of expertise, I wonder whether the report's heavy focus on the

emotional aspect ("whole hearts") might dilute the chance of the strategic and operational message being taken up.

Connecting the dots to other conversations:

- The report acknowledges that North-South dynamics matter. Yet, it also misses an important opportunity to help readers link the report to a broader ongoing dialogue on [shifting the power to the Global South in MEL](#) (see also [here](#)). ([#Evalsowhite](#) has not really [caught up?](#)).
- If the focus on learning continues to grow, we are likely to face a critical gap in the pipeline of skilled human resources that is fit for filling the new jobs. If no pipeline of well-networked, "[unicorn](#) or [miracle](#)" mavericks-jugglers is available, you cannot assume that they will come to these roles and be able to implement the report's recommendations.

A question this report does not ask but perhaps should is: given the current attention that learning currently enjoys across organisations, at least in principle, what is needed to capture this window of opportunity before it tapers down and closes? Is it time to invest in nurturing a group of networked mavericks who can embed learning within a broader set of organisations, especially [across the Global South](#)? And how can this be done most effectively?

PS: If tapping into this window to advance complex-minded MEL is an issue you are interested in, including to figure out the value of TWP in the context of localisation, reach out. We would love to hear your emerging thoughts and practices on this!

About the author: Florencia Guerzovich is an internationally recognized impact and learning independent consultant with over 20 years of experience commissioning, producing, reviewing, and supporting the use of evidence in development and governance strategies and programming. She has worked with philanthropy, multilateral organizations, academia, public sector, civil society and communities in more than 50 countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. She is also a collaborating researcher with Grupo de Pesquisa Politeia – Coprodução do Bem Público: Accountability e Gestão, ESAG – Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina (Brasil), a member of the Independent Evaluation Panel of The Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and a member of the Red de Políticas.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this review are those of Florencia Guerzovich and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

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