

Using explicit rubrics for opportunity assessment

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A rubric is a means of adding clarity, objectivity, transparency and rigour to an evaluation or rating process where the criteria are essentially *qualitative* or *intangible* and the numbers are either hard to come by, non-existent or of limited value. It is believed that the early work in the use of rubrics in an educational setting was undertaken by the Ontario Ministry of Education in the 1960s. Their use in an industrial setting for opportunity analysis, prioritisation and evaluation was pioneered by Bowman and McCullough in the 1990s².

Most organisations “pick their winners” – the projects and opportunities they want to pursue - by articulating explicit criteria, identifying and describing projects and opportunities which might meet the criteria and evaluating the opportunities. Those that “best meet” the criteria are selected, typically by a committee, and those that don’t are rejected or postponed.

This process takes place in every organisation. There is always some way to decide what to do and what not to do.

The Canadian scientific research granting community, primarily government funding agencies, has to do exactly the same thing - they use assessment criteria in their application processes and arrive at granting decisions in much the same way. It is never an easy process and diverse opinions, occasionally unresolved, are common.

Some years ago, two internationally known Canadian research scientists, Dr Clement Bowman and Dr. Ron McCullough, decided that there must be a better way to evaluate scientific grant applications against the grantors’ criteria. The problem was that there was no easy way to evaluate all the *intangible* factors which were almost always inherent in a grant application. Many of the applications were little more than a gleam in an applicant’s eye, yet experience proved they could be highly successful if they were funded.

They solved the problem by adding *explicit measures* to each explicit criterion – an “explicit rubric” if you will – designed to measure *the extent to which* each criterion was addressed in an opportunity.

They recognised that evaluation against a criterion could only have four generic options - fails to meet a criterion, partially meets a criterion, completely meets a criterion, and exceeds a criterion. They converted these generic measures into explicit measures related directly to each criterion. By checking just one of the four explicit measures, evaluators could indicate the degree to which they thought the criterion was actually met in the application.

“Opportunities” can be almost anything. For instance, the following rubric was used in the evaluation of competitive business case presentations at the 2010 International Business Case Competition at Royal Roads University, Victoria BC, Canada. “Identification of the key issues in the case” was one of 20 independent assessment criteria used by the judges, each one having its own rubric. Each judge merely checked a single explicit measure for each rubric. The software did the rest, producing a list of the competitors in the order of their ability to meet the explicit criteria.

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² See Bowman, C W, “*Intangibles*”, Grafics Publishing, Sarnia, Ont., 2005. www.clembowman.info and www.progrid.info

Criterion 1 - Identification of the Key Issues in the Case		
Generic measure	Explicit measure	Check
Failed to meet expectation	The team failed to identify the key problems/issues in the case	
Partially met expectation	The team correctly identified the key problems/issues in the case but failed to use those they identified as the focus for their presentation	
Met expectation in every respect	The team correctly identified the key problems/issues in the case and built their whole presentation around them	
Exceeded expectation	The team correctly identified the key problems/issues in the case, and built their whole presentation around it. In addition , the issues were re-enforced throughout the presentation to strength the team's argument	

Bowman and McCullough recognised that most opportunity assessments implicitly contained two “overarching” objectives and that they were often either in conflict with one another or an opportunity was unlikely to score highly on both of them at the same time. Examples are short term vs. long term benefits, environmental impacts vs. economic benefits, price vs. quality, and so on. Clearly one of the assessment objectives was to identify the opportunities that ranked highly with regard to both of the overarching criteria, so the result had to be expressed on a graph or a grid as well as in a linear form.

Most opportunity assessments are made as a result of the simultaneous assessment of multiple criteria by several evaluators. So they incorporated multiple criteria and peer group assessment into their methodology. They also designed an algorithm which dealt effectively with the multiple criteria.

The need for transparency required that the results were made evident to all the participants (for example, the opportunity “sponsors”) so that the reasons for acceptance or rejection were quite clear - a crucial component of accountability. So they devised a “ranking report” which compared each opportunity on its ability to meet the criteria, ranked them 1 to n and added the amount of funds involved and a cumulative total. The opportunities above the “funding line” were provisionally approved, the rest not. Then the peer group met to discuss the assessments with special attention being given to those immediately above and below the funding cut-off line and any opportunities or criteria where the peer group members disagreed.

Whether they were selected or not, each opportunity generated a full report on how it met, or failed to meet, the expectations in respect of each criterion. Important lessons for next time!

The system they devised is called ProGrid® and it is now used to help evaluate over \$1 billion every year in project and opportunity applications in the Canadian science and research community on the basis of their intangible criteria. It is exceptionally rigorous, easy and inexpensive to use, completely transparent, easily auditable and highly accurate³. Indeed the many ProGrid® users we have talked to would not dream of returning to the “traditional” way of evaluating competing opportunities.

Almost all organisations, corporate or government, face the same problems that the scientific research granting community once faced. There is never enough money to fund all the opportunities; many of criteria are either intangible or difficult to relate explicitly to the organisation’s objectives; consensus between peer-group evaluators is sometimes difficult to achieve; some are merely “bright ideas” but nevertheless potentially valuable; and it is difficult to avoid “apples and oranges” comparisons between opportunities with widely disparate concepts or impacts.

ProGrid® has rapidly become the standard opportunity assessment methodology in Canada. It is now available to any organisation which thinks that it spends too much time and effort on assessing competing opportunities and priorities on the basis of their intangible criteria.

ProGrid® methodology and software can be found at www.progrid.info,

³ The author has had the opportunity to compare ProGrid’s results with those of other more traditional and time-consuming methods and found no significant differences.