

# Exploring what COVID-19 means for changes to our evaluation practice

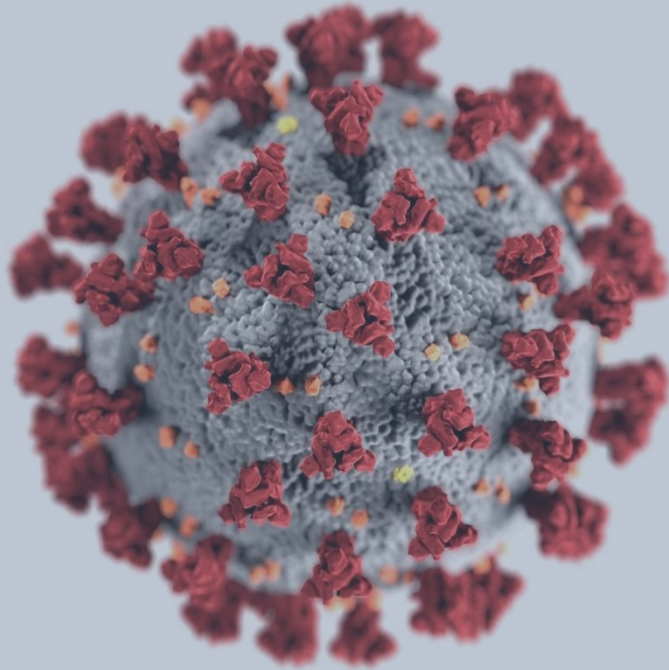


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## Part One: Evaluating in a COVID-19 world

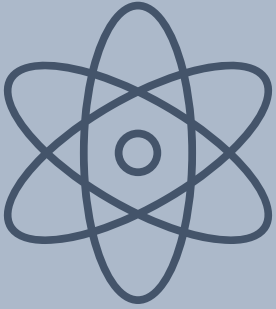
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By Judy Oakden, Director, Pragmatica Limited – a member of the Kinnect Group

While COVID-19 has significantly disrupted our lives, a closer inspection shows we are not all impacted in the same ways. For example, some groups have experienced huge financial and social impacts, while others have not.

Recently, practitioners in the fields of economic development and evaluation made sense of the fast-shifting contexts they find themselves in during two events I attended: the **Economic Development New Zealand (EDNZ)** online conference and the **Australian Evaluation Society's** online **FestEVAL**.

In this article I consider what the COVID-19 disruptions might mean for evaluation practice, based on my learning at these events.



## People are using new types of real-time data for decision making

At the [EDNZ conference](#), the economists and policymakers impressed me with the new sources of real-time data they are using to produce indicators of the state of our economy.

Ben Wallace from the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) ran what I thought was a standout session called ***Evidence and Insights – the real-time data challenge***. He described using existing data from the government, [published as a dashboard](#), and locating new sources of data from the private sector to add real-time insights.

For example, to better understand how small businesses are faring, online accounting software firm Xero regularly produces anonymised, aggregated metadata of [New Zealand small business insights](#). This provides MBIE and the wider business community a timely snapshot of the health of those New Zealand small businesses using their accounting software.

## Evaluators are looking for ways to better connect

At the [AES FestEVAL](#) I found evaluators looking for innovative ways to connect in this new COVID-19 climate. Over 100 evaluators registered for the session Julie Elliott, Susan Garner and I ran at FestEVAL called ***Agile Connections***. Some associated the title with Agile project management methodology which they thought we might connect with evaluation. There may indeed be merit in this combination.

But for this presentation, in response to COVID-19, we drew on [Michael Arena's](#) work, developing adaptive spaces. We suggested that adaptive spaces could be designed online for both professional development and conducting evaluations when we cannot meet face-to-face

Adaptive spaces, while not specifically developed for COVID-19 may offer a useful way to act in the unpredictability we currently face. Arena suggests creating spaces to connect to discover, develop, diffuse and disrupt.

We reflected that adaptive spaces can be developed online to support; finding others to work with, engaging in unusual ideas and with outliers, and following the energy of possibility. We also realised they can help to build more diversity in our networks. When professionally managed, they can also help teams embrace conflict more productively in COVID 19 conditions. The notion of working with productive conflict resonated strongly with some participants, particularly in settings that are unpredictable and where there is no clear “right choice”.



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## Evaluators need to work faster to be relevant – whilst still retaining credibility

As with the economists, evaluators are being asked to work to shorter timeframes in response to COVID-19. Evaluators see the need to speed up their practice where possible, according to four in five of the 70 or so evaluators who responded to a survey question during the AES FestEVAL session, *Evaluating fast or slow*.

Set up as a debate, evaluators Eleanor Williams and Sean Chung considered the benefits and challenges of adopting faster forms of evaluation. Eleanor advised that to remain relevant we need to work to the policy makers' rapid turnaround times. Sean cautioned that to remain credible, we also need to ensure we retain sufficient quality in our work. Participants agreed both aspects are important.

In the wider discussion after the debate, I noticed three themes in participants' concerns with working faster.

- The most marginalised and vulnerable may be missed if speedy fieldwork favours online approaches. COVID-19 has already made clear the digital inequity which exists in our society.
- Ethics and privacy issues must still be addressed when working faster and when working with administrative data.
- When working with less data, evaluators will need to clearly state data limitations to avoid the risk of overclaiming findings, particularly if insufficient time has elapsed for outcomes to emerge.

## How might we respond?

Based on what I heard at these events, I believe we are going to need to use new and different forms of data in our evaluations. We are going to need to connect differently and more often, using online platforms. We need to speed up our evaluation practice.

What might faster evaluation, using new forms of data, exploring tensions or conflicts, and drawing on broad connections look like? Are there glimpses in our current practice that might be promising? How might we ensure our evaluations continue to serve and give voice to the most marginalised?

*This is the first in a series of posts where a group of evaluators, Nan Wehipeihana, Judy Oakden, Kellie Spee and Kahiwa Sebire, will explore our current evaluation practice for signals to the future.*

*Look out for our next posts where we delve into some ideas to address these issues.*



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