

WITH ALL OUR HEARTS

**Demand-Driven Learning in the
International Development Sector**

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REPORT

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Executive Summary

Far too often, the practice of organizational learning, along with monitoring and evaluation (MEL), is undertaken as a form of compliance with donor mandates, and therefore as a manifestation of upward accountability. In other words, evidence suggests that while organizations are talking the talk on learning, they are not widely walking the walk. Using a mixed methods, positive deviant based approach,[1] we set out to explore **what a more bottom-up, demand-driven form of learning would look like**—one practiced with all our hearts? We also set out to explore **to what degree do organizations in the international development sector already practice this?**

MEL specialists we consulted on internet platforms Slack and Zulip endorse our claim that the sector does well in discussing and promoting the benefits of MEL, but often fails to acknowledge that merely carrying out learning activities does not guarantee that the knowledge gained will be utilized effectively.

With the premise that demand-driven MEL aligns well with the attributes required to create a learning organization, we performed a content analysis of job postings for MEL specialists. We found that the large majority of evaluation consultants are commissioned by multilateral agencies (53%) and development banks (30%), whereas NGOs and other entities comprise only 17% of recruiting agencies. This suggests that evaluation still primarily resides higher in the hierarchy of resource flows within the sector.

The analysis of job postings also revealed that the **applicant qualifications listed for MEL practitioners generally did not reflect the tasks outlined in the scope of work.** This disparity suggests that organizations recognize the need to incorporate demand-driven MEL into their strategy but aren't necessarily taking it into consideration when hiring MEL employees. We also discovered that **the extent of the emphasis on learning varies widely across organizations.** For example, 10% of the analyzed job descriptions (JDs) didn't mention any element of organizational learning while some (21%) included entire sections solely dedicated to learning-oriented tasks. Additionally, while most JDs (58%) paid some attention to mindsets and values relevant for demand-driven MEL, **the majority of applicant qualifications focused on traditional technical skills.**

Executive Summary, cont.

Semi-structured interviews with positive deviants and thought leaders highlighted the tension between compliance-driven and demand-driven learning. At least one positive deviant and/or thought leader overcame this dynamic by:

- seeing MEL as the driving force of success and taking an all-in approach;
- devolving responsibility;
- making medium to large investments in MEL;
- keeping a laser focus on intrinsic incentives;
- building systems for rapid data uptake, analysis and quick wins;
- and by prioritizing innovation and creativity.

We conclude that far more organizations are “walking the walk” than the term positive deviants might suggest. Nonetheless, we found ample evidence that MEL is still by and large a donor-driven exercise in downward accountability.

