

PARTICIPATORY METHODS TOOLKIT  
A practitioner's manual

Expert Panel

## Colophon

Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual  
Method: Expert Panel

This is an extract of the publication 'Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual', a joint publication of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (viWTA).

The full version of the manual includes:

- Introduction about participatory methods
- General guidelines and tips for participatory methods
- Complete description of 13 participatory methods: 21st Century Town Meeting® ; Charrette ; Citizens Jury ; Consensus Conference ; Deliberative Polling® ; Delphi ; Expert Panel ; Focus Group ; Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation ; Planning Cell ; Scenario Building Exercise ; Technology Festival ; The World Café
- Brief descriptions of 50 methods and techniques

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### Layout and printing

Belgian Advertising (B.AD)

### Legal depot

D/2005/2893/19

### ISBN

90-5130-506-0

With the support of the Belgian National Lottery

September 2005

# EXPERT PANEL

## **I. DEFINITION**

The main task of an expert panel is usually synthesising a variety of inputs – testimony, research reports, outputs of forecasting methods, etc. – and produce a report that provides a vision and/or recommendations for future possibilities and needs for the topics under analysis. Specific tools may be employed to select and motivate the panel, assign tasks and elicit sharing and further development of knowledge.

## **II. WHEN TO USE**

Expert panels are particularly appropriate for issues that require highly technical knowledge and/or are highly complex and require the synthesis of experts from many different disciplines. This method is not designed to actively involve the broad public.

## **III. PROCEDURE<sup>1</sup>**

### **A. Overview**

The preparation for an expert panel includes specifying the task, determining the desired composition of the panel and then recruiting panel members, a panel chair and support staff. Once formed the expert panel is expected to investigate and study the topics assigned and set forth their conclusions and recommendations in written reports. If a study is of special topical interest, arrangements may be made to schedule a (public) session at which issues, findings, conclusions and recommendations of the report are presented.

### **B. Preparation**

#### **1. DEFINING THE PROJECT**

A project must be formulated carefully to ensure a clear understanding of the nature of the task, its aim and extent, any limitations or restrictions and the range of disciplinary expertise required among the members of the committee that will undertake it. Agreement on these elements should be sought with the requesting agencies or other originating sources; careful consultation is important to avoid misunderstandings later. However, once agreement on these essentials has been reached, it must be made clear that conduct of the work is the responsibility of the panel. This responsibility includes the determination of the approach to be taken and the substance of the report or other resultant product.

<sup>1</sup> Note: Most of the information provided here is a condensed version of the Royal Society of Canada's Expert Panels: Manual of Procedural Guidelines. For more detailed information, please refer to this manual (see references).



## 2. RECRUITING PANEL MEMBERS AND SUPPORT STAFF

This section addresses the process of forming a panel, including the resources for identifying potential chairs and members.

### *(a) Composition and Balance in a Panel Profile*

The first step in assembling the panel nomination slate is to develop a profile of the panel. The two key dimensions of this profile are composition and balance. Composition concerns the mix of expert knowledge and experience needed for the panel to understand, analyse and draw sound conclusions about the issues before the panel. It can be represented in the question, What kinds of knowledge should the panel have? A well-composed panel will be technically competent to deal with the task.

Balance concerns the even-handed representation of differing points of view that can be expected to affect the conclusions on issues the panel will address. Because these differences often involve value judgements held by a committed adherent to one side of an issue, the question of balance can be represented as, 'What kinds of value judgements may be relevant to the panel's task? Sometimes balance can be achieved by having opposing views represented in the panel membership. In other circumstances, particularly when the opposing views are strongly held and not subject to a factual test, it can be better to seek members who are not strong proponents of the contending perspectives. The panel profile in such cases should aim more for balance in each member and rely on briefings, workshop presentations, etc. to bring forward the best evidence and arguments from the strongly opposed sides. However it is achieved, a balanced panel is one that has excellent prospects of achieving impartiality in its final conclusions and recommendations.

The panel profile must explicitly address both composition and balance. To do so the project profile must be taken into account:

- Project scope: Will the study be limited to technical problems or will it address broad issues of public policy?
- Degree of controversy: Do the problems to be addressed have alternative resolutions that are controversial, affecting parties who have strong emotional, political or financial stakes in the outcome or are there no stakeholders with strong commitments to a particular outcome?
- Technical support: Will the panel's conclusions and recommendations be based more on data analysis or on the panel's expert judgment?
- Will the panel's conclusions adequately represent the uncertainties?
- Disciplines: Do the issues involve a single discipline or are they interdisciplinary?

### *(b) Roles of the Panel Chair*

The chair of the panel guides the process of analysis and seeking solutions for technical, scientific, policy, professional or social issues that are often complex and may be highly controversial. The chair serves as facilitator and team builder for the panel and as lead architect/integrator of the panel's report. In addition, the chair aids in project management and is the chief spokesperson in representing the panel to sponsors and the study's audiences during dissemination.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Facets of each of these roles, as panel facilitator, project manager, report architect/integrator and spokesperson are discussed in greater detail in the Royal Society of Canada's Guidelines.



### *(c) Guidelines for Interviewing*

The following guidelines cover the key points in interviewing potential panel members and panel chairs. Items that apply just to interviews of potential panel chairs are in [square brackets]. It is sometimes advisable to communicate in writing first by sending a candidate a copy of the statement of work and a note saying you that intend to call to explore his/her interest in participating.

- Indicate that the context for the call concerns the expert panel nomination process. Identify the study by title and sponsor.
- Discuss the origin of the project, its objectives and the statement of the task. Ask the candidate to comment on the task and to offer suggestions about it and how the study might be carried out. The responses will provide insight into what the candidate knows about the subject, his or her thought processes, points of view, etc. Then ask what kinds of expertise are required to make up an appropriate committee, including soliciting suggestions of individuals who meet the requirements. Only then should the interviewer ask about the candidate's interest, availability and willingness to participate.
- State that another purpose of the call is to explore the candidate's interest and availability to serve on the study panel, if nominated. [In interviewing a potential chair, state that you are, in particular, interested in whether the candidate would be interested in being considered for the panel chair.] Explain that you are putting together a nomination slate, from which a committee will make the final panel selection. This is not the final round in the panel selection process, since the committee must take into account many composition and balance factors.
- Offer to elaborate on why the study is being undertaken. Describe the expected time demands of the study. [In interviewing the potential chair, be especially clear on these points, above all on the time demands and the chair responsibilities anticipated.]
- Listen carefully to the candidate's response and the level of interest (s)he conveys. Ask questions, as appropriate, to better gauge the motivation to serve as a member [or as panel chair].
- If the candidate appears interested in serving, it is necessary to discuss the subjects of balance and conflicts of interest.<sup>3</sup> Here is one possibility for addressing the subject:

'We are trying to assemble a panel that is free of direct conflicts of interest and is appropriately balanced with respect to different points of view on the study's issues. For this purpose each panel member will be asked to complete a confidential form, the purpose of which is to disclose any points of view or conflicts of interest. At the first meeting panel members will also be asked to discuss their backgrounds and activities as indications of their perspective and any strongly held views or commitments relevant to the study task.

I would like to run quickly through the areas of principal concern. At this time, you don't need to give specific, detailed answers but you may want to ask about any that you think might apply. A positive response to any of these questions does not necessarily indicate a problem with serving on the panel; more often it indicates areas we need to consider when balancing the panel.'

<sup>3</sup> For very detailed guidelines on disclosure of personal involvements and other matters potentially affecting panel service, refer to Section 5 of the Royal Society of Canada's Manual of Procedural Guidelines on Expert Panels.





Ask the following questions:

1. Organisational affiliations: Do you have any business affiliations or volunteer non-business affiliations, such as with professional societies, trade associations or civic groups or with organisations that might benefit in a direct way from this study if the issues came out a certain way? To your knowledge, have any of these organisations taken a public stand on the issues related to the study?
  2. Financial interests: Do you have financial interests, whether through employment, consultancies or investments in companies or other entities whose value or business would be directly affected by a particular resolution of the issues in this study?
  3. Research support: Do you receive any research support from agencies, organisations, etc. that might have an interest in the outcome of this study?
  4. Government service: Have you provided services or been employed by an international, national, regional or local government, including advisory boards, that would be seen as relevant to the topics covered by this study?
  5. Public positions: Have you published articles, given testimony or made speeches that might be viewed as stating a commitment to a particular view on the issues in this study? Do you hold office in or otherwise formally represent an organisation that is closely identified with a particular point of view on the issues this study may address?
- If an obvious conflict of interest has been identified, indicate that it could pose a problem for panel membership per se, but would not preclude other contributions to the study, perhaps through an oral or written briefing.
  - Express appreciation for the candidate's time. Emphasise the exploratory nature of the call and reiterate that a larger slate of nominees will be put forward than will actually serve. If it seems appropriate, you can explain the various aspects that are considered in balancing a panel and emphasise that selection is in no way a judgement on a nominee's technical qualifications. Inquire as to whether the candidate has suggestions for other panel members.

*(d) Developing the Nomination Package*

- Define the panel profile. Use the project profile and the statement of task to define a profile of the panel. What areas of expertise are needed for composition? What points of view or different perspectives on the issues are needed for the panel to be balanced?
- Develop a 'long list' of candidates.
- Cut down to a 'short list' and establish a slate of primary nominees and alternates. Unless they have been contacted previously during the 'long list' step, exploratory calls are made to the candidates selected as primary nominees and alternates. Each slate must include at least one alternate for the chair and at least one alternate in each major expertise category. Where a category requires several nominees, more than one alternate should be proposed. The alternates must be serious candidates – not just 'gap fillers'. Alternates for the chair can also be proposed as primaries or alternates elsewhere on the slate.

### *(e) Technical Writer*

It may prove very useful to include a technical writer in the staff complement. The professional demands on the time of panel members and panel chair are such that the inclusion of a technical writer in the staff will almost always prove to be a great advantage in the drafting of the panel report.

## **C. Conducting the Expert Panel**

### *(1) The Role of an Expert Panel*

The expert panel is expected to investigate and study the topics assigned and set forth their conclusions and recommendations in written reports. These reports are often the only lasting products of the panel's work and deliberations. Thus, reports must be given early and close attention. The sponsor's expectations of the expert panel should be set forth from the beginning. Some of the most important often include:

- Expert panel reports are scientific and technical inquiries; they require the same standards of integrity and conduct as other scientific and technical studies.
- Panels should strive for a consensus report, but not at the expense of substantially watering down analyses and results. It is much better to report serious disagreements and explain why the disagreements exist than to paper over such problems. Lack of consensus on all points is not a failure of the panel and will not be treated as such.
- Members of the panel serve as individuals, not as representatives of organisations or interest groups. Members are expected to contribute their own expertise and good judgement in the conduct of the study.

### *(2) Guidelines for the First Panel Meeting (Public Meeting)*

#### General Meeting Objectives

- To complete panel formation through the discussion of panel composition and balance.
- To ensure the panel understands the expert panel process and their roles.
- To introduce the panel to its task, by clearly conveying:
  - the study's origins and context
  - study objectives (statement of task)
  - sponsor expectations
  - expectations of other important audiences, e.g. governments
- To begin the immersion of the panel in the subject matter of the task.
- To produce an agreed-upon plan by which the study will be conducted:
  - the general nature of the report to be written (e.g. through a topical outline)
  - a strategy for conducting the study, including:
    - research methods, data acquisition approaches, etc.
    - panel structure, if any, and/or roles of panel members
    - assignments to various panel members for undertaking specific study tasks





- topics for future meetings
- future meeting schedule
- an agreed-upon milestone chart for project tracking

#### Typical First Meeting Architecture

- Session 1: Discussion of the origin, background, task statement and objectives of the initial study plan, led by the chair or study director involved in preparing the prospectus.
- Session 2: Discussion with sponsor(s) of the task statement and their views on origins, context, schedule imperatives, objectives and so forth.
- Session 3: Expectations of other important audiences, if any.
- Session 4: Discussion of panel composition and balance. Full presentation by each panel member and staff of her/his background as it relates to the study.
- Session 5: Initial immersion in the subject matter of the study, often through briefings by sponsors and others on subjects of major importance to the study.
- Session 6: Discussion among the panel and project staff of the study approach and plan, resulting in an agreement.

If required, additional open (public) panel meetings can be scheduled but the working meetings are not normally open to the public.

#### *(3) Preparing the Expert Panel Report*

The reports that expert panels prepare should be given early and careful attention. Experience with many panels shows that consensus building and report writing are the most difficult parts of the study process. The following tips are important:

- Start early.
- Define early, no matter how tentatively, the 'architecture' of the report. Refine it and fill it in as the study unfolds.
- Give writing assignments to panel members as soon as it is practical to do so.
- Produce writing assignments on time, even if they are rough and incomplete.
- Empower and use the project staff (especially the technical writer) to assist the chair and other members of the panel in filling out draft sections, integrating them and smoothing the report by putting it into one consistent style.

**TIP:** It is essential that none of the members provide any kind of briefing until the final report is completed. Everyone must agree to complete confidentiality!

Some elements that should be included in the report are the following:<sup>4</sup>

- charge
- description of panel composition
- scientific uncertainty
- distinguishing evidence from assumptions
- distinguishing analysis from policy choice, especially in risk-related issues
- citation of other relevant reports
- managing study completion
- consensus and disagreement.

### **D. Presentation of the Panel Report**

If a study is of special topical interest, arrangements may be made to schedule a public session after submission of the final report at which issues, findings, conclusions and recommendations of the report are presented.

The following information should be prepared and, if appropriate, made available to the public:

- project prospectus, the signed contract and related official correspondence
- names and principal affiliations of panel members.

Upon completion of the study reports should be disseminated to appropriate persons and in general made available to the public.<sup>5</sup>

If desired, the report can be submitted for peer review, prior to public dissemination.<sup>6</sup>

### **IV. RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS (TIME, BUDGET)**

Realistic estimates of time and costs are especially difficult in the early stages; underestimating is common. Estimates must include provision for assembling the panel and staff, holding meetings, preparing the report and seeing it through a review process (if applicable) and publishing and disseminating the final result.

The following items listed are the main budgetary items in an Expert Panel:

- Personnel
  - professional, technical and support staff salaries
  - honoraria for experts
  - research associates and assistants
  - subcontracts, especially for technical services (if applicable)
  - honoraria for peer reviewers (if applicable)

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed guidelines on these elements of the panel report, refer to Section 6 of the Royal Society of Canada's Manual of Procedural Guidelines on Expert Panels.

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed guidelines on planning for effective dissemination, refer to Section 9 of the Royal Society of Canada's Manual of Procedural Guidelines on Expert Panels.

<sup>6</sup> The Royal Society of Canada's Expert Panel Manual provides guidelines for report review in Section 7.

- Travel
  - experts
- Accommodation
  - for experts, if required but not included in honoraria
- Food
  - meals for Experts, if required but not included in honoraria
- Recruitment and Promotion
  - recruitment of experts
- Communications
  - printing and dissemination of final report
  - translation costs (if required)
- Facilities
  - location for the expert panel to meet
  - location for public presentation of the final report, if applicable
- Materials and Supplies
  - (As required by the expert panel and researchers)

Some inevitable uncertainties regarding the budget include:

- estimating the number of occasions on which the panel will be convened
- estimating the number of days on each such occasion, during which the panel will deliberate
- forecasting the likelihood that the panel will have to re-convene after the peer review comments have been received (if applicable).

## **V. ADDITIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS**

The panel participants should be diverse and it is important that, in addition to technical qualifications, the individuals concerned are creative thinkers who can bring diverse viewpoints to bear, work well in groups and are prepared to speak freely without feeling that they have to represent a particular interest group.

It can also be valuable to bring together different types of players who might not normally meet in the course of a panel – such as innovators, financiers, policy makers, academic researchers, users or consumers, etc.

Panels need to avoid too narrow representation, which is liable to result in little challenging thinking, lobbying by interest groups or perceptions that vested interests are in charge.

Panels need to be chaired and facilitated effectively, to maintain motivation and morale, to resolve conflicts, to monitor timetables and external constraints, to prevent over-dominance of strong personalities, etc.



## **References and Resources**

Practical Guide to Regional Foresight in the United Kingdom.

Royal Society of Canada (1998) *Expert Panels: Manual of Procedural Guidelines*. Version 1.1. Ottawa (Ontario), Canada.  
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