Reviewer's report

Title: The sustainability of new programs and innovations: A review of methods and findings

Version: 1 Date: 30 May 2011

Reviewer: Stephanie Bertels

Reviewer's report:

Is the question posed original, important and well defined?
While the research question posed was easily identifiable and easily understood, I questioned why you limited the review so strictly to studies that examined sustainability in health care settings. I'm not suggesting that you expand your question or re-do this particular systematic review, however, as you move forward with this research program, I would encourage you to broaden your search criteria into other management domains to explore studies that have addressed the sustainability of other change initiatives (such as the total quality movement). These analogous change initiatives may enrich your understanding of the sustainability of interventions in the health-care context.

After asking myself what I had learned, I was able to answer that I was able to confirm that little work has been done on the sustainability of the implementation of change initiatives and that much research remains to be done in this area. I also asked myself what I hadn’t learned that I expected to. While the study is a high quality systematic review, I felt you missed an opportunity to make an important contribution. I never did learn what you meant by sustainability, or what after reviewing the work of others, you think an appropriate definition should be. I think you missed a big opportunity to make a contribution by lending some much needed construct clarity.

• Are the data sound and well controlled?
I have no issues with the method to select which studies were included as data, although I would note, as I mentioned above, that I believe that the study may have been bounded a bit too tightly, which may have limited the contribution that can be made. Drawing from data from other areas of management could have generated a stronger set of future research recommendations.

• Is the interpretation (discussion and conclusion) well balanced and supported by the data?
The results are presented in an unbiased manner, and the conclusions do appear to be well supported by the data. That said, I felt like the authors may have taken this too far and in the process, failed to make a more meaningful contribution. In my mind, the contribution of systematic reviews is not only to report on the combined findings of the studies, but to structure the findings in a way that adds value beyond what the individual studies lend on their own.

• Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details
provided to allow others to evaluate and/or replicate the work?

The study is well described, the methods are appropriate and reproducible. The study adheres to norms around systematic reviews. That said, I suggest you take a look at a chapter by Briner and Denyer (2010), which draws attention to the need to involve managers in the development of the question that bounds a systematic review and also discusses the need to contribute beyond a re-telling or summarizing of the work that has been reviewed.


• Can the writing, organization, tables and figures be improved?
The paper is extremely well written. It was a pleasure to read.

• Revision requested:
The discretionary revision that I would request is that you try to offer a definition of sustainability that could be used in future research in this area. If you were to do this, I think it would move from a very good paper, to an excellent paper.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.