



## RESEARCH UTILIZATION AND DISSEMINATION

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## KEYWORDS :

## INTRODUCTION

Although considerable improvements have been made in the dissemination of disability and rehabilitation research (Blasiotti, 1992), a gap still persists between the development of useful research findings and their availability to those who will most benefit from them. The process of dissemination is intended to produce an effect—utilization of information—on the part of the recipient. Production of this utilization effect becomes limited when a proposed scope of work simply addresses the following: (a) production of documents, and (b) relocation of those documents from Point A to Point B. Few of these researchers define their dissemination activities to "fit" specific goals of utilization that address who will most benefit from the research finding, and how they can best learn about it in order to apply it. In general today, the concept of utilization is understood far less by researchers than is the concept of dissemination.

## DIFFICULTIES UN RESEARCH UTILIZATION

The purpose of research is to be of use—to change current practice, or to confirm it. Yet the process of moving new understandings and new products from research to practice usually takes years, decades, or even generations. Although there are good reasons for moving carefully—new research needs to be evaluated, replicated, and refined—too often the pace of change is set, not by a rigorous process of review and refinement, but by the gap between the research community and the world of practice. Research on dissemination, or knowledge utilization as it is sometimes called, has yielded a wealth of information about what does and does not work. But, due to this gap, those understandings for the most part have not moved from the research community—those who study the process of knowledge use—to the practice community—those responsible for adopting and applying research outcomes. As a result, most dissemination practices are still based on a mechanistic, linear conception of dissemination as a process of "getting the word out."

**Researchers are frequently not addressing utilization goals with sufficient detail to overcome these complexities:**

1. The actual quality of a research design is less important, in terms of its likelihood of being adopted and used, than the extent to which it fits with users' established beliefs and experience.
2. The source producing research outcomes is more important than the quality of the research design. People tend to trust sources with whom they have established relationships and/or for whom they have high levels of respect.
3. The degree of credibility of information sources is related to two factors: perceived expertise and perceived trustworthiness. The more intensely people are involved with an issue, the more likely they are to question both the expertise and the trustworthiness of those whose information contradicts their own current understandings.
4. When research outcomes do get used in real-world

settings, the resulting practices, programs, or products are often quite different from the researcher's original conception. While researchers often produce new information, they do not routinely provide demonstrations or other utilization assistance to interpret how it "fits" into real-world environments. Additionally, utilization requires that some adaptations be made to apply new models into existing contexts.

5. The extent to which the intended beneficiaries of particular research are involved in the research process, the more likely a researcher will have stories, examples, and general information that is couched from the "user" perspective. This information is often critical in promoting utilization.

**What is the difference between dissemination and utilization?**

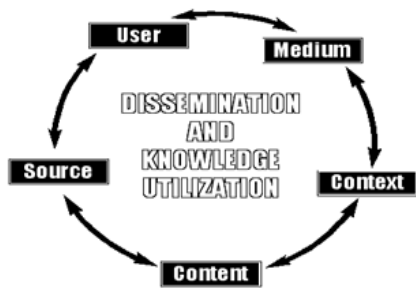
Many researchers, when they begin planning for dissemination and utilization, think primarily about the "D." Dissemination is the important item on most people's agendas: how to get research results to intended audiences in the most effective, cost-efficient manner. But utilization is a critical element in increasing the effective reach of research outcomes. Focusing only on the "D" in D&U is like dialing nine numbers of a ten-digit telephone number: You may be 90 percent finished, but unless you dial that last digit, you'll never make the intended connection. What do dissemination and utilization address? Where does one kind of activity end and the other begin? There is no single, clear line of demarcation, dissemination has been unable to break free of its roots—its Latin roots, that is: a literal reference to scattering seed. People associate dissemination with spreading the word; the process of how ideas and information become used seems another issue altogether. So it's helpful to pull the two ideas apart, to assure that each can be addressed explicitly. We've found the following to be a useful way of thinking about D&U: Dissemination speaks primarily to the process of knowledge transfer – the who, what, when, and how of moving ideas and information from the source(s) to intended recipient(s). Utilization speaks primarily to purpose and to impact—why you want people to get the research outcomes you're putting forth, what use you want people to make of the ideas, information, or products, and how people are actually using them.

Both dissemination and utilization activities must be planned and conceived to meet the needs of a specific user if each is to be efficient and ultimately successful. Utilization that may occur through activities that are not structured—for example, through dissemination activities—may just happen. This approach to utilization is not, however, desired for researchers to consistently use and assume will be effective in moving research to practice. A need exists for clear ways to link dissemination and utilization for the purpose of moving research findings into the hands and minds of those that can most benefit from them. Facilitating such utilization requires a structured, planned approach.

**All utilization is not the same**

The phenomenon of "utilization" varies from person to person. Even groups which may have been previously considered homogeneous, such as people with disabilities, share unique beliefs, abilities, and understandings. Strategies for achieving research utilization among such groups must embrace varying preferences and aptitudes for processing information about a new research outcome/application and rejecting it as unnecessary, as well as processing information about a new research-based innovation and applying it routinely in activities of daily living. Both of these outcomes are reflective of the wide continuum of utilization. In order to change pre-existing understandings, groups or individuals first must recognize a certain "need." A reason has to be perceived in order to make a shift in thinking. Or, as Backer (1994) puts it, "People and organizations develop the energy to change when faced with real pain." When old ways do not seem to be working as well as they should, when current explanations cannot account for a new circumstance, when the status quo is no longer comfortable, these are times when real change in understanding and behavior are possible.

**BUILDING BLOCKS OF UTILIZATION MODELING**



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To develop the knowledge transfer base that underlies utilization, there are five common core elements that are keys to success.

**These core elements strongly influence whether utilization efforts will be effective:**

- source - Where does the research information come from?
- content - What is the research information about?
- context - How does the research information relate to existing knowledge or products?
- medium - How can I get the research information?
- user - How can I benefit from this research information?

It provides further descriptive information about these elements. Each element is couched from the potential user perspective. Issues and characteristics of each of these elements are highlighted.

Elements and Issues Related to Utilization Modeling	
Elements/User Questions	Characteristics Determining Utilization of Research Results
<b>SOURCE</b> <i>Where does it come from?</i>	Perceived competence of researchers and research organization Credibility of experience of researchers Credibility of motive Sensitivity to user concerns and applications Relationship to other sources trusted by users Orientation toward use or application
<b>CONTENT</b> <i>What is it about?</i>	Credibility of research and development methodology Credibility of outcomes Comprehensiveness of research outcomes

	Utility and relevance for potential users Capacity to be described in terms understandable to users Cost effectiveness Research design and procedures Relationship between research outcomes and existing knowledge or available products Competing or similar research-based knowledge or products
<b>CONTEXT</b> <i>How does it relate?</i>	Relationship between outcomes and existing knowledge or products Current issues in the field Competing knowledge or products General economic climate
<b>MEDIUM</b> <i>How can I get it?</i>	Physical capacity to reach intended users Timelines of access Accessibility and ease of use, user friendliness Flexibility Reliability Credibility Cost effectiveness Clarity and attractiveness of the information "package"
<b>USER</b> <i>How can I benefit from it?</i>	Perceived relevance to own current needs User's readiness to change or try something new Information sources trusted and valued Format and level of research-based information needed Level of contextual research-based information needed Dissemination media preferred Capacity to use and benefit from research-based information or product (resources, skills, and support)

**CONCLUSION**

As a number of experts point out, most research "is not used as a can opener is used" (Huberman, 1987). Many research outcomes have implications for the ways in which programs are run, services are provided, money is allocated, information is interpreted, or materials are used. In cases where change is conceptually complex, and in cases where substantive change is demanded in individual or organizational beliefs or behaviors, the process of knowledge use is vastly more complicated. The effectiveness of any "utilization model" rests upon the degree to which it "fits" a particular potential user group. The degree to which an intended user group has diversity and wide-ranging characteristics, the greater the necessity of having a range of "utilization models" to accommodate those differences (Douthitt, 1995; Flowers, Edwards & Pusch, 1996).

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