How to Create an Impact Framework

How an impact framework improves your funding, focus, and results

researchfish
by interfolio

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Introduction

Increasing Focus on Research Impact Presents Significant Opportunity for Nonprofits that Fund Research

For nonprofit organizations that fund research, it's become critical to show the impact of your funded research.

That's because well-informed donors, the lifeblood of funding, increasingly want to know that their donations will have a positive impact on healthcare or society.

As a result, to effectively compete for dollars, research funders must develop the ability to track and communicate the impact of completed research.

To do so, nonprofit organizations that fund research need to build an impact framework—that is, a systematic, detailed approach to tracking and demonstrating the specific impacts of their research.

This ebook presents the specific steps to build such a framework.

Defining Research Impact

So, what exactly is research impact?

It's easier to define this phrase in the context of other related concepts, specifically research outputs and research outcomes.

Funded research is an activity that results in research outputs, research outcomes, and research impacts.

A **research output** is something produced from the research, such as a published research paper or a new compound.

A **research outcome** arises as a result of someone doing something with the research outputs. For example, if a member of the public reads a research paper about ideal sleep schedules that leads him to adopt a consistent sleep schedule, that person's new practice is an outcome of the research. That outcome in turn has an impact: the person becomes healthier as a result of adopting a consistent sleep schedule.

Thus, "impact" refers to the positive benefit that results from a research outcome.

The impacts of research can be wide and varied: saved lives; better quality of life; fuller, richer lives from new knowledge, etc.

For example, consider the finding from sleep research that adolescents have a different biological clock that causes them to fall asleep later at night and arise later in the morning.

Imagine if one high school/secondary school principal reads about this research and changes their school's start time to later in the morning to accommodate teens' need to sleep in later. This would be an outcome of the research finding.

The impacts of that outcome might be happier, more alert teen students, better class performance, and grateful parents.

If other schools saw these successes and adopted the same later school start, the impact of the research finding would ripple out further.

In this way, research impacts can set off a chain of collisions/impacts.

Please also note that the lines between outputs, outcomes, and impacts can sometimes be blurry. That is, some might consider the publication of a research study an outcome of the study and the use of the information by an individual as an impact.

For this reason, Researchfish generally focuses on and refers only to outcomes, recognizing that this term encompasses both outputs and impacts. As such, the remainder of this ebook uses the term "outcomes" in this broader sense.
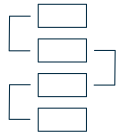
The Two Simple Steps to Building an Impact Framework

Building an impact framework requires only two simple steps.

Step one
is to define your objectives.

Step two
is to choose outcomes that map to your objectives.

These outcomes will in turn help you discover the impacts of your research. More about that later.

First, though, you have to define your objectives, and before that, we have to define what we mean by objectives.

An ordinary dictionary definition works perfectly well: according to dictionary.com, an objective is "something that one's efforts or actions are intended to attain or accomplish; purpose; goal; target."

Your nonprofit may already have objectives, but if not, you can follow the below process to create your objectives:

- **Step 1:** Understand your current strategy
- **Step 2:** Dig deeper into how you define success
- **Step 3:** Define success by defining your objectives

Choosing Quality Objectives

Whether you already have objectives or need to create them, you should consider that not all objectives are of equal quality.

Consider this hypothetical objective: **Our aim is to make the world a better place.**

This is no doubt an admirable sentiment, but it is much too vague to be useful. An organization with this objective could be doing any number of things, from delivering meals to senior citizens to funding theoretical physicists.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are objectives that are so specific that they are likely to fail or limit an organization's ability to shift when an unexpected opportunity arises.

For example, if your goal is to successfully treat all cases of breast cancer by 2025 with immunotherapy, you run the risk of failing to achieve the objective and/or locking yourself into only one treatment modality even though a more promising one may arise.

As you might guess, the best objectives fall somewhere in the middle between being too vague and too specific.

What does such an objective look like?

You could be forgiven for not knowing. A quick review of some of the most well-known charities won't reveal a webpage devoted to objectives. You might find mission statements or strategic priorities, but these statements are not nearly as useful as clear objectives.

For example, instead of having the mission of fighting poverty, wouldn't it be better if an organization had the following specific objectives?

- Discover the factors that promote poverty in the United States

- Uncover novel interventions that do not depend on government action to lift people out of poverty in the U.S.

- Test pilot programs for corporate and other partnerships that address the root causes of poverty, both in the U.S. and in the global world.

These are all specific, focused objectives. They give an organization a heading. And they say to donors, "Hey, we have a theory of how we can effectively address poverty through research studies, and here's how we're going about it."

The Sixteen Common Outcomes

Once you've created your organization's objectives, the next step in building your impact framework is to choose outcomes to measure that map to your chosen objectives.

We advise organizations to choose from the below comprehensive framework of outcomes, which was developed by funding institutions:

Publications	Engagement Activities	Intellectual Property and Licensing	Spinouts
Collaborations and Partnerships	Influence on Policy, Practice, and the Public	Medical Products and Clinical Trials	Awards and Recognition
Further Funding	Research Tools and Methods	Artistic and Creative Products	Other Outputs and Knowledge
Next Destination and Skills	Research Databases and Models	Software and Technical Products	Use of Facilities and Resources

As you can see from the above table, these 16 different types cover most, if not all, conceivable outcomes from research. Some of these items are outputs, such as publications, while others are outcomes, such as influence on policy, practice, and the public.

In some cases, an organization may need to track outcomes that fall outside of these sixteen categories. For example, if an organization has the objective of funding a particular area of research, it might wish to track its total funding in that area as an output/outcome.

Many of the outcome types in the above table are self-explanatory or well understood, but a few require explanation for clarity's sake.

- **Engagement activities** refers to any output or outcome in which the researcher or others engage with other people, including policymakers and the public, about the research, particularly its potential applications or utility.

- **Spinouts** refers to companies that are started as a result of a research finding. Spinouts based on intellectual property often have a significant impact because they create many jobs, but not all spinouts are underpinned by patents. For example, several prominent positive psychologists have started their own consulting companies to share their findings and those of other positive psychologists with companies around the world.

- **Artistic and Creative Products** could be created either by the researchers themselves or other individuals. The 1992 film Lorenzo's Oil, which dramatizes research developments relating to adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD), is a good example. More recently, the 2011 film Contagion, about a pandemic, was based on various research findings.

- **Other Outputs and Knowledge** refers to other types of outputs or outcomes that don't fall neatly into any of the other categories, such as the creation of a charity or volunteer organization as a result of the research.

- **Next Destination and Skills** captures two distinct concepts. The "next destination" part refers to a new position or positions that anyone on the funded research team may gain as a result of the completed research. The "skills" refers to new skills that anyone on the research team developed as a result of the research project.

- **Use of Facilities and Resources** refers to any facilities or resources that the researcher gained access to as a result of conducting the research. For example, if the research project enabled the researcher to use special cell lines for the first time, that would be considered an outcome of the research.

So, given your objectives, which of these 16 outcomes types should your organization choose? We offer guidance in the next section, with examples of how particular objectives naturally suggest certain outcomes.

Examples of Building a Research Impact Framework

You can see the process for building an impact framework in action by looking at a few hypothetical examples.

Let's return to the example of a charity that funds research to address poverty and has the following objectives:

- **Discover** the factors that promote poverty in the United States.

- **Uncover** novel interventions that don't depend on government action to lift people out of poverty in the U.S.

- **Test** pilot programs for corporate and other partnerships that address the root causes of poverty, both in the U.S. and in the global world.

With these three objectives, there are a few outcome measures that are immediately obvious as likely to result from the work:

- **Publications**

- **Engagement Activities**

- **Collaborations and Partnerships**

- **Influence on Policy, Practice, and the Public**

But there are other outcomes that seem possible from this work as well, specifically Awards and Recognition; Other Outputs and Knowledge; Research Tools and Methods; Artistic and Creative Products; Further Funding; Next Destination and

Skills; Software and Technical Products; and Use of Facilities and Resources.

In total, that's 12 potential outcome types. Examples of these outcomes would be research papers, partnerships with retail corporations to study approaches to lifting their employees out of poverty; an inspirational documentary short on a success story; new skills for the researchers that conduct the charity's research; an app that teaches financial literacy skills to those living below the poverty line; and even new charities that build on the work of the funding organization.

To measure the impact of these outcomes, this organization would track these 12 outcome types and their impact on society. More about that in the next section.

For now, let's look at another hypothetical charity that funds research. This hypothetical organization, which we'll call Brighter Tomorrow, is focused on addressing health disparities through research into health education and educational attainment. It has these objectives:

- **Determine the most effective interventions** for educating children and adults in disadvantaged communities on healthy habits.

- **Develop interventions** for improving the educational attainment of children in disadvantaged communities.

- **Uncover the best approaches** to overcoming barriers to healthy behavior and educational attainment in disadvantaged communities.

The outcomes that seem to map best to these objectives are the same as for the previous example charity.

For example, this charity's work might result in publications detailing research-validated methods for teaching healthy habits; an influence on practice through how civic leaders try to address barriers to educational attainment; an artistic product in the form of an inspirational children's book on a community that benefited from the charity's research findings; a civic responsibility award from a local city; and public-private partnerships between local communities and grocery chains that make fresh fruits and vegetables widely available in these communities.

One final example is worth considering: a nonprofit research foundation focused on funding cancer research. Such a nonprofit might be interested in funding research in a number of areas of basic and translational research. So consider the below goals a subset of the organization's objectives:

- **Develop** novel, inexpensive screening methods for all forms of cancer.

- **Uncover** epigenetic changes that precede cancer development.

- **Determine** effective interventions for increased adoption of a whole-food, plant-based diet in various populations.

- **Advance and refine** immunotherapy approaches to treating cancer.

- **Fund** basic and translation research on rare cancers.

Given these objectives, all sixteen of the common outcomes are possible and should be tracked.

In addition, a seventeenth output would also be worth tracking: the organization's total funding of research on rare cancers. By tracking this output, the organization can assess its fulfillment of the corresponding objective about rare cancers.

Now that you've seen several examples of fully constructed impact frameworks, what does an organization do with their framework? And how does that help them assess their research impact?

We answer these questions in the next section.

Using Your Impact Framework

Now that you've chosen outcomes that map to your objectives, the next step is to start collecting data for each of your chosen outcomes. Since your outcomes likely include more than just research publications, collecting all of this non-bibliometric data without specialized technology would be extremely challenging and inefficient.

To help research funders more easily gather this data, we created the Researchfish platform, which uses technology and algorithms to collect the outcomes of research from the web, external data sources, and the researchers themselves.

Because the outcomes of research may occur several years after the conclusion of a research project, we advise funders to track outcomes for the life of the project and at least five years afterward.

Tracking outcomes for so long may be new to your organization. Perhaps you presently rely only on end-of-grant reports from grantees to determine the outputs of a project. But doing so is far too limiting.

There are often time lags between the conclusion of a research study and the information percolating out into the public and having an impact. Healthcare research translation to clinical practice often takes as long as 17 years. Research in the humanities and social sciences can have a

time lag of four or more years until impacts occur.

Nor is the path from output to impact strictly linear. Instead, your research, together with other studies, may create a web of impacts.

For these reasons, limiting your impact assessment to reviewing an end-of-grant report is just as inadequate as only looking at citation data.

If you instead track and evaluate all outcomes for at least five years, you'll have a much richer data set that you can use to inform funding decisions and persuade donors.

Going from Outcome Tracking to Measuring Impact

Once you have outcome data, you can analyze the data and conduct targeted follow-up investigations to measure the impact of your research.

For example, let's look at the hypothetical charity that had this research objective:

- Test pilot programs for corporate and other partnerships that address the root causes of poverty, both in the U.S. and in the global world.

Imagine that one of their funded pilot studies revealed that providing a living wage combined with targeted online education to retail employees not only lifted current workers out of poverty but also allowed them to advance to better-paying positions within the company, such as positions in I.T.

Moreover, the costs of the higher wages and online education were offset by increased revenue for the company from the customer goodwill the program created and the avoided costs of searching for an outside I.T. specialist.

Researchfish's platform reveals that these findings resulted in a published paper as well as a change in practice: namely, an expansion of the program to other employees in other parts of the country.

The charity's experts follow up on this change in practice and learn of its impact:

namely, each employee that participates in the expanded program is lifted out of poverty.

In addition, retail competitors begin losing employees to the retail company offering the program. As a result, these competitors begin offering similar programs, resulting in even more families being lifted out of poverty and gaining new professional skills. These new programs and improved family circumstances are additional impacts of the initial research finding.

In summary, one first measures outcomes and then carries out targeted follow-up investigation to measure impact.

Ready to get started?

This ebook provides you with all the information you need to create your own research impact framework.

Once you have a research impact framework in place, our Researchfish platform can help you track the outcomes from your research so that you can investigate your research's impact. Researchfish's team can also help you understand and interpret your outcomes data.

For example, our team can help your organization determine whether the outcomes captured meet your organisation's objectives and what actions could be taken over the next year.

Seeing the impact of your research and having documented proof of that impact will help you in a multitude of ways:

✓ It will help you **attract additional funding or donations**.

✓ It will help you **identify your most impactful research studies**, so that you can then build on those successes.

✓ It will help **guide future funding decisions or research priorities**.

In short, knowing your research impact is critical to achieving your objectives and improving the world in your own specific, targeted way.

Without this knowledge, you only have good intentions without any real sense of what your work is accomplishing.

But with detailed, verified knowledge of your research impact, you distinguish yourself from countless other organizations that have the best of intentions but no actual proof of their effectiveness or impact.

About Interfolio

Conceived by academics for academics, Interfolio is an education technology company headquartered in Washington, DC, USA and in Cambridge, England, UK. Founded in 1999, Interfolio operates the acclaimed Faculty Information System for colleges and universities, the Researchfish impact assessment platform for funders and research organizations, and the widely used Dossier service for individual scholars. Over 400 clients based in 15 countries choose Interfolio's technology for hiring and recruitment, academic appointments and timelines, activity data reporting, faculty reviews and promotions, and research impact analysis. Interfolio provides scholar-first products for the full academic lifecycle—from job seeking to professional accomplishments, committee service, funding award compliance, career growth and advancement, administrative leadership, and beyond. For more information about Interfolio, please contact team@interfolio.com or visit www.interfolio.com.