E2A Tool Kit:

I. A Tool Kit Overview

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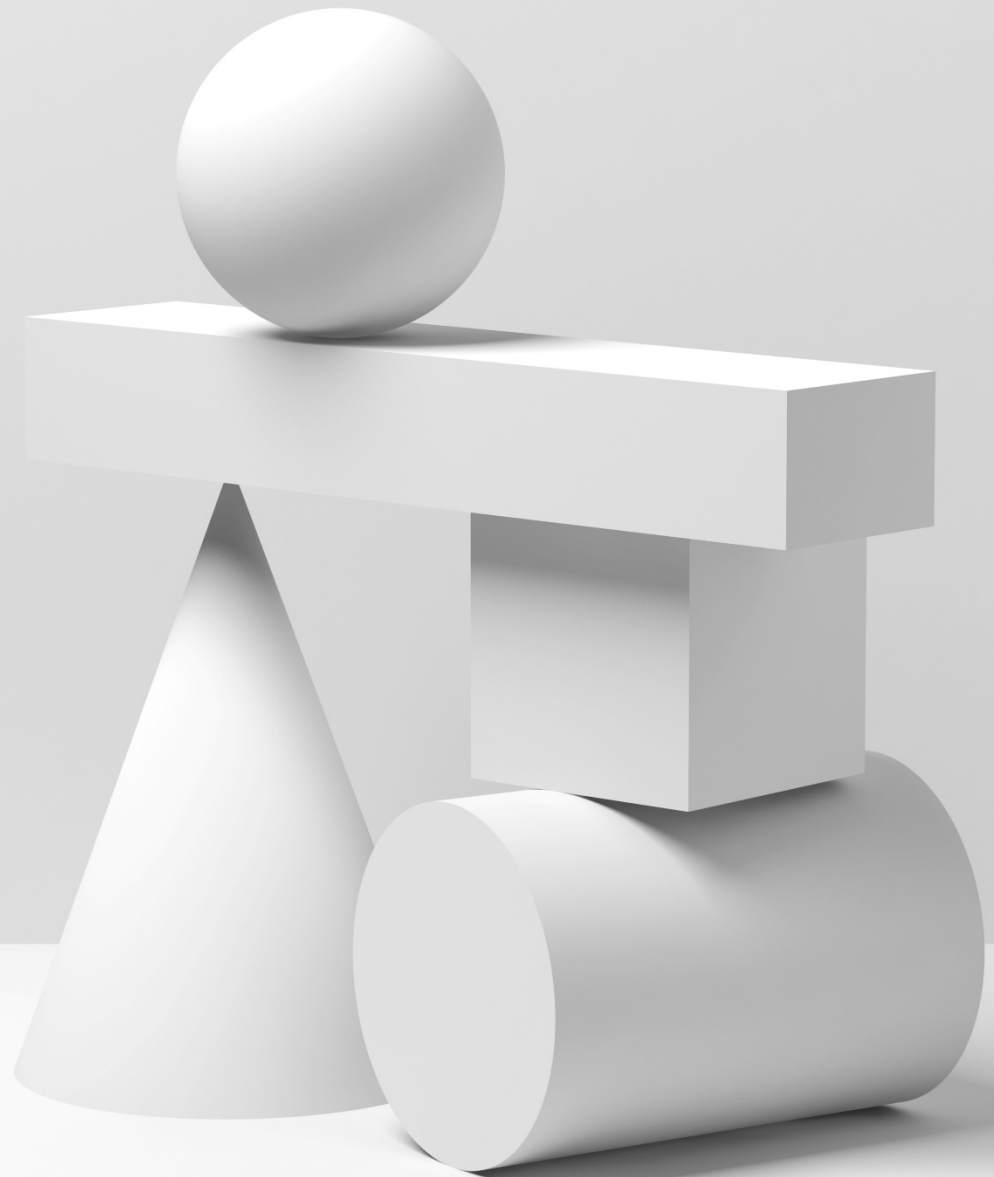
I. A Tool Kit Overview

We strive for a world where decisionmakers use evidence to improve people's lives. For that to happen, we—as a research community—need to produce intentionally designed research products that help practitioners apply evidence to action (E2A).

We invest a lot of time in generating evidence. We spend time developing and executing rigorous designs, collecting and analyzing data, writing up results, and reviewing them for accuracy. What we don't do enough of is think *upfront* about how to design research products with clear messages that stick and make it easy for practitioners and policymakers to apply findings. Too often, we think about sharing evidence once we have completed our research. By then, much of the design work is done and we are either ignoring user needs or hastily retrofitting our research products for dissemination.

It doesn't have to be this way. There are so many great examples of accessible research writing and dissemination that have shaped both individual and group behavior. (Books like Nudge, Atomic Habits, and Deep Work present research insights in easy and actionable ways. Publications like the New York Times and Washington Post use data visualizations to convey nuanced insights from research and data in memorable ways). We can learn from and apply the examples offered by those works to our work.

Goals and scope

We have designed this tool kit to help research teams plan for and develop effective evidence-to-action research products. While we hope that it will be useful for a wider audience, we have written this for research contractors who work for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and for DOL staff who review and provide guidance on research contracts. Moreover, we have written this guide to help research contractors reach and influence practitioner audiences (referred to in this toolkit as users). We hope this toolkit will help DOL contractors and DOL:

- **brainstorm options** for evidence products and services,

- devise effective **dissemination strategies**,

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- **share expectations** on what DOL wants from evidence products and services,

- **build contractor and staff capacity** to deliver products and services that lend themselves to E2A, and

- conduct **quality assurance reviews** to assess whether they are E2A-ready**.**

When we say *products*, we don't just mean reports – we mean the full spectrum of products that describe or present evidence. We have begun by developing useful tips for more common research products, and we hope to add more over time. Our hope is that this aid will be useful at multiple stages of the research design, execution, and dissemination process.

Naming and taming our nemeses

Developing effective E2A products can be difficult work. Let's name the barriers to doing this so we can proactively address them.

- **Writing for researchers***:* Many of us are trained to write effectively for other researchers or technically oriented project officers and reviewers. Those audiences value rigor, detail, and nuance. But the busy decisionmaker often looks to us for concise and clear answers on a few discrete questions. To shake loose from our defaults, we start with a special emphasis on planning for E2A early and identifying and understanding target users and their needs.

- **Teamwork under time and budget constraints:** We often develop research products collaboratively with teams of three or more people who likely have varying technical talents and communication skills. Even when a team intends to develop E2A-friendly products, the process of collating components often stands in our way. This guide seeks to build capacity by distilling insights on best practices into skimmable bullets and providing illustrative examples. We also include a specific section on how to organize teams.

- **Review processes***:* We get multiple rounds of review both from technical research experts and subject matter experts. More is more in this world – it is rare for us for us to get feedback that suggests the deletion, rather than the addition, of detail. Addressing these comments can come at the cost of more effective E2A writing, which is why we provide strategies for handling the review process.

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How to use this tool kit

- **Read the planning chapter:** We recommend that everyone read Chapter II. Planning for E2A Products at the beginning of their research projects and revisit it often. E2A products need intentional design and planning, and some steps are common to all research deliverables.

- **Pay close attention to the writing chapter:** We also strongly advise that everyone read Chapter III. Written Products: Writing for Impact. Simple actionable writing (and the focus on core messages needed to get there) is the foundation for all effective research products.

- **Skip to the remaining chapters based on need.** The remaining chapters focus on deliverables other than written products: presentations, one-pagers and infographics, and data visualization. Each of these chapters has a similar format: an introduction describing the current and desired states, a section on planning, and guidance on content development, reviewing, and finalizing.

- **Check out the sources section at the end of each chapter.** The section on "Sources" in each chapter lists the resources that we drew on for inspiration when developing the content in the chapter to supplement lessons from our own experiences.
    - We intentionally drew on insights from different disciplines that are captured in different formats (e.g., books, toolkits, blogs, websites).
    - These resources are excellent reading. We encourage you to review them as time permits. Many offer helpful deep dives on the given topic area – we just pulled out a few nuggets that can be readily applied and tried to present them in ways that are not overwhelming.
    - For the sake of readability, we avoided using in-text citations. We included these only when we quoted directly from a text or drew heavily on a particular resource.

- **Share feedback and ideas with DOL.** This handbook is a first pass at finding ways to improve the usability of our work. The current addition covers commonly recurring E2A products but we know there are many more. Over time, we hope to update this handbook with additional sections and examples.

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Sources

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About this Project

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Finally, we are grateful for the scores of experts from across disciplines who share their ideas with the world on how to communicate effectively and influence action. We are learning from you, applying your recommendations, and learning and adapting as we go. We hope this collation of the many ideas you've shared and additions to them do justice to your wisdom. All errors are our own.

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