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A Profile of B.C. Provincial Policy Analysts: Troubleshooters or Planners?

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Abstract

Despite the existence of a large body of literature on policy analysis, empirical studies of the work of policy analysts are rare, and in the case of analysts working at the sub-national level in multi-level governance systems, virtually non-existent. This is especially true in many countries, for example, the U.S., Germany, and Canada, all federal systems with extensive sub-national governments but where what little empirical work exists focuses on government at the national level. This research note reports the findings of a 2008-2009 survey aimed specifically at examining the background and training of provincial policy analysts in Canada, the types of techniques they employ in their jobs, and what they do in their work on a day-by-day basis. The profile of sub-national policy analysts working in British Columbia presented here reveals several substantial differences between analysts working for national governments and their sub-national counterparts, with important implications for policy training and practice, and for the ability of nations to improve their policy advice systems in order to better accomplish their long-term policy goals.

Introduction: The Supply and Demand for Policy Analysis in Government[1]

Canadian governments, like those elsewhere, are facing more complex policy environments in dealing with multi-faceted issues such as climate change and international migration; issues with unheard of spatio-temporal dimensions and interlinkages. Like those other governments, Canada needs more and better policy analysis to help guide government decisions and actions. However, in order to improve policy analysis, one must first know more about the present state of affairs: who is providing the analysis, what is being provided, and with what effect?

Of course policy analysis is not a subject that has suffered from a dearth of attention. Many journals and specialized publications exist on the subject and specialized graduate schools operate in many countries, states, and provinces (Geva-May and Maslove 2007; Jann 1991). Studies have examined many hundreds

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of case studies of policy-making in numerous countries and many texts describe in detail both the various analytical techniques expected to be used in public policy analysis (Weimer and Vining 2004) and the nuances of the policy-making processes (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009).

However works examining the actual "supply and demand" for policy analysis in government are much harder to find (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007). And where these exist they almost always focus on the "demand" side of the policy advice market, examining the strengths, weaknesses, and other characteristics of the knowledge utilization process in government (Weiss and Bucuvalas 1980; Weiss 1992; Pollard 1987; Beyer and Trice 1982; Innvaer et al. 2002). Work on the behavior and behavioral characteristics of in-house policy analysts in supplying advice to government, let alone those working outside it, are rare (Nelson 1989; Aberbach and Rockman 1989; Wollmann 1989; Thompson and Yessian 1992; Radin 1992; Boston et al 1996; Bushnell 1991; Binz-Scharf, Lazer and Mergel 2008).[2]

This situation has led many observers both inside and outside government to demoan the lack of even such basic data as how many policy analysts there are in government, working on what subjects, and with what techniques (Behm, Bennington and Cummane 2000; Bakvis 1997; Hunn 1994; Weller and Stevens 1998; Waller 1992 and 1996; Uhr and Mackay 1996; State Services Commission 1999 and 2001).

The Sub-National Case: Provincial Policy Analysts in Canada

This general situation is true of most countries. However, even where some little work has been done on the subject, serious gaps remain in our knowledge of bureaucratic policy analysts. If information on national or central governments is weak, the number of studies that focus on sub-national units in countries with multi- level governance systems can be counted on one hand (Larsen 1980; Hird 2005. ON Canada see McArthur 2007 and Rasmussen 1999).

This latter point is a substantial issue for the study of policy advice systems and professional policy analysis in many federal countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, Australia, and the U.S, where as many as 50% of traditional bureaucratic policy analysts may work for sub-national state or provincial governments. In these multi-level systems, sub-national governments control many important areas of policy-making, including health, education, social services, local government and land, resources, and the environment, and exercise controlling interest over policy development and implementation in these areas (Bache and Flinders 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2001, 2003).

Both these situations are true in Canada, where studies of policy analysts have traditionally focused almost exclusively at the federal level (Voyer 2007; Prince 1979; Prince and Chenier 1980; Hollander and Prince 1993) despite the fact that the provinces control many important areas of social, economic, and political life.

In order to correct these problems, in 2008-2009 a survey similar to Wellstead et al's (2007) investigation into Canadian federal analysts was conducted of policy analysts working at the provincial and territorial levels. This survey was specifically designed to examine the background and training of provincial policy analysts, the types of techniques they employed in their jobs, and what they did in their work on a day-by-day basis. It was intended to assess the extent to which, following Wellstead et al., provincial civil servants, too, fall into the categories of trouble-shooters vs planners in terms of their day-to-day activities and orientations. The results of the survey are presented below in the form of a profile of BC provincial policy analysts, a typical mid-sized sub-national policy analytical community. [3]

A Profile of BC Provincial Policy Analysts

The data collected from the survey allowed a profile of provincial public servants to be constructed for the first time. Data were divided into ten topic areas: demographics; experience; career expectations; job

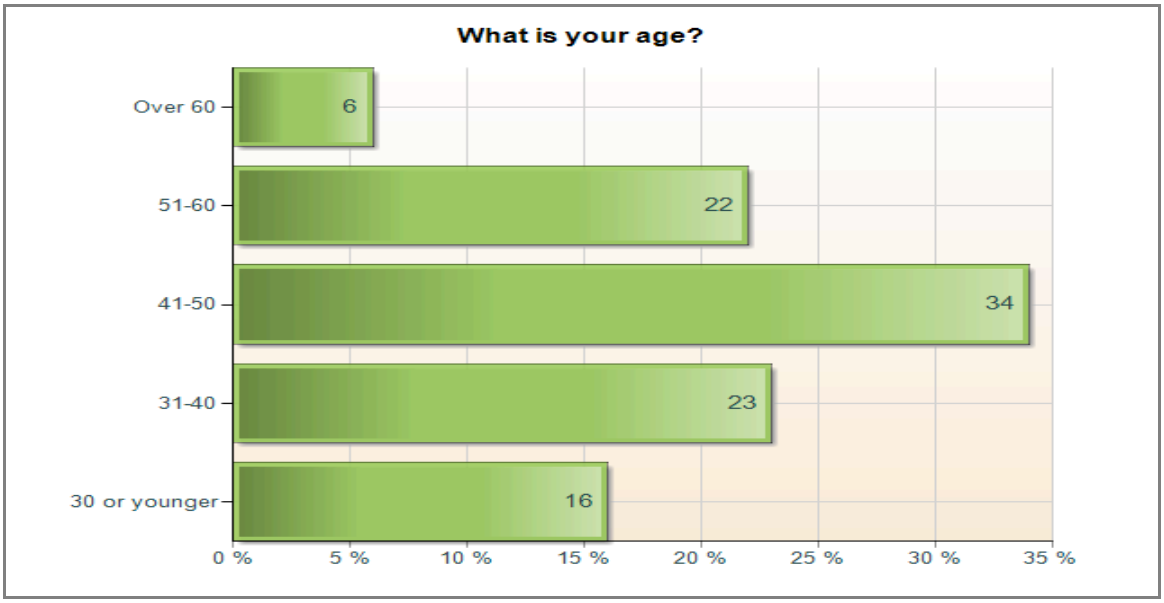
conditions; interactions; location; training; analytical techniques employed; and demand for high quality analysis.

The Demographic Profile of BC Analysts

The first variable examined, gender, revealed that BC policy analysts are predominantly female (65%). This is significantly higher than the provincial average (58-42% female to male) and also quite a bit higher than the federal average, (51-49 male-to-female). This finding suggests some important gender-related aspects of training, job markets, and/or intra-civil service career paths both at the provincial level and in BC which appear to differ from those in the federal civil service and requires further analysis.

A second finding (see Figure 1) is that BC provincial policy analysts are quite young with 40% under 40. This is similar to the provincial average (43%) but is older than federal analysts, 58% of whom are under 40.

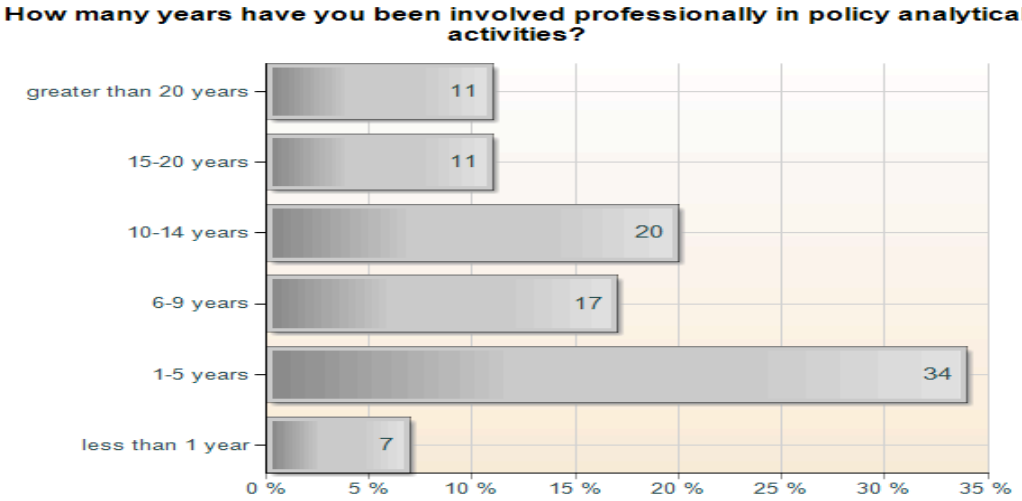
Figure 1: Age Composition of BC Policy Analysts



Work Experience

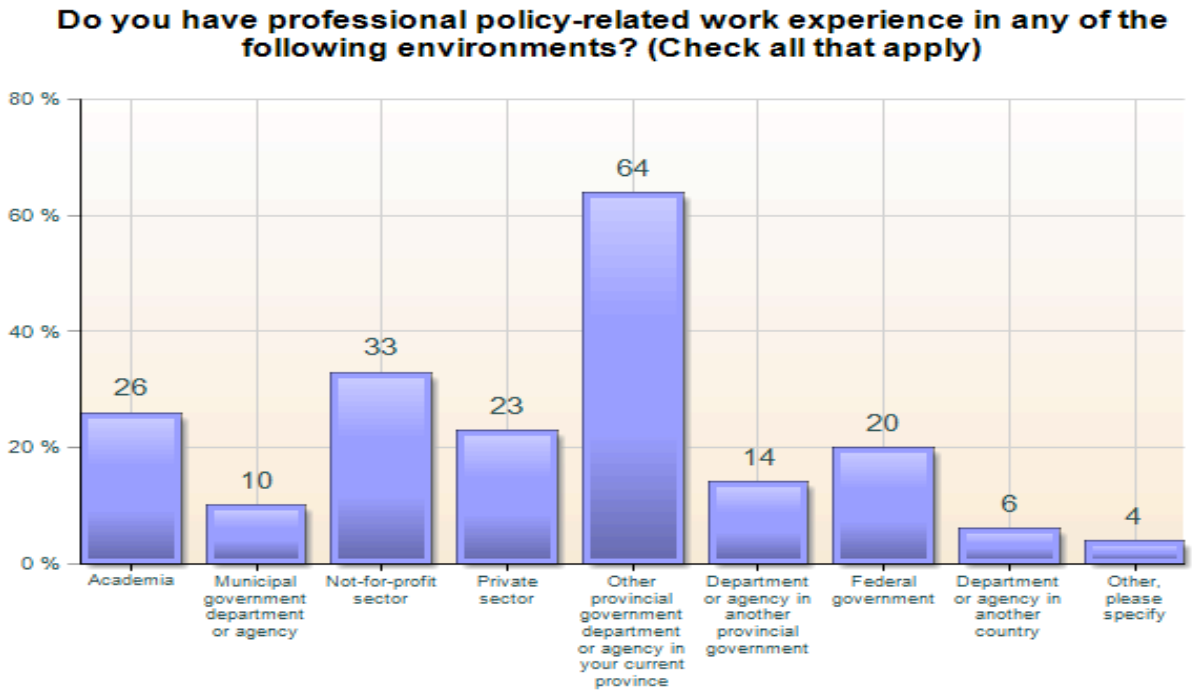
The second topic addressed in the study was work experience as a policy analysts (see Figure 2). BC provincial analysts on average are relatively inexperienced with 41% of persons professionally involved in policy analysis having been in their jobs for less than 5 years. Although this is similar to the provincial average it is quite different from the federal situation where 30% of analysts have over 20 years experience. This situation may well reflect the date at which hirings of professional policy analysts began: with the current federal group undergoing generational replacement while the provincial hires are much more recent, and younger.

Figure 2: Work Experience of BC Policy Analysts



BC analysts have mainly have worked in other parts of provincial Government (see Figure 3). This is higher than other provinces (44%). BC analysts are also much less likely to have smaller private sector experience than federal government analysts (41%).

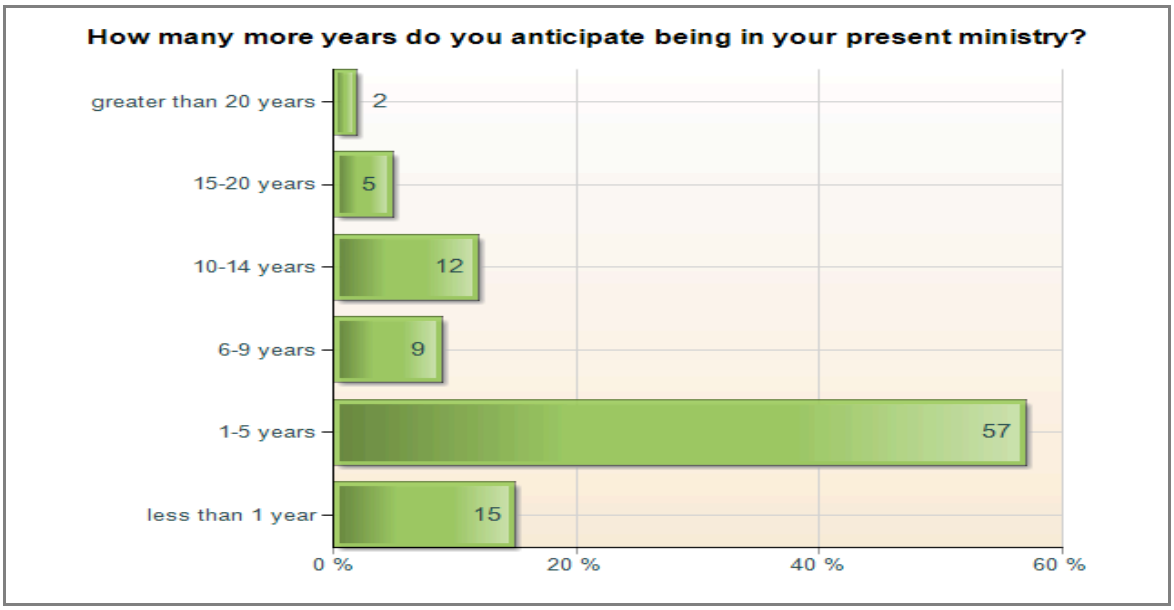
Figure 3: Work Experience of BC Policy Analysts



Career Expectations

In terms of career expectations: BC analysts are very transitory and mobile – about 73% expect to be in their present position for less than five years (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Projected Career Path of BC Policy Analysts

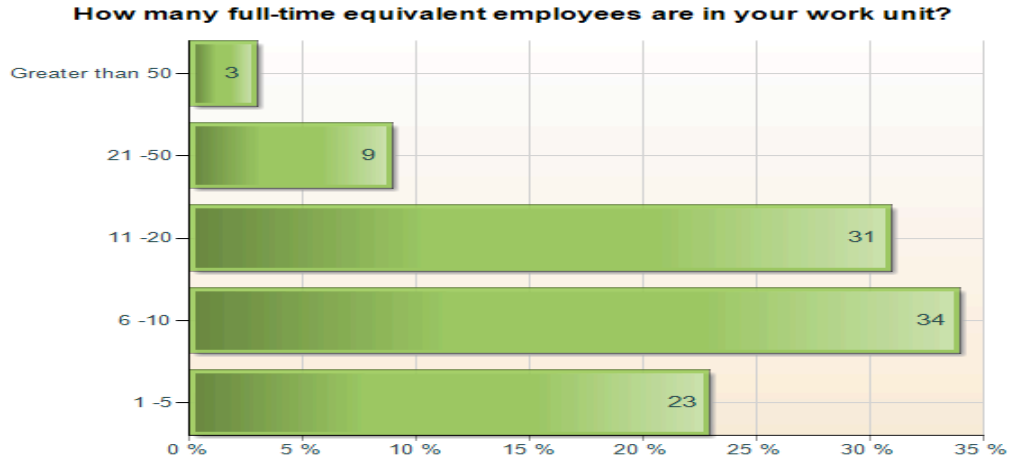


This is much higher than provincial average (59%) and that of the federal government (47%).

Job Conditions

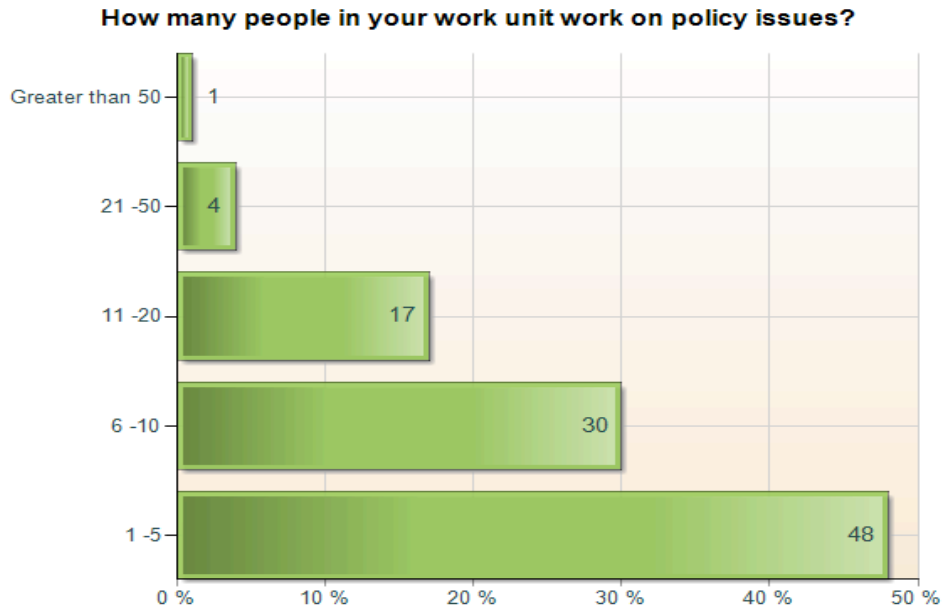
In terms of job conditions, BC analysts typically work in small units – 56% in units of less than 10 FTE employees (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: BC Work Unit Size



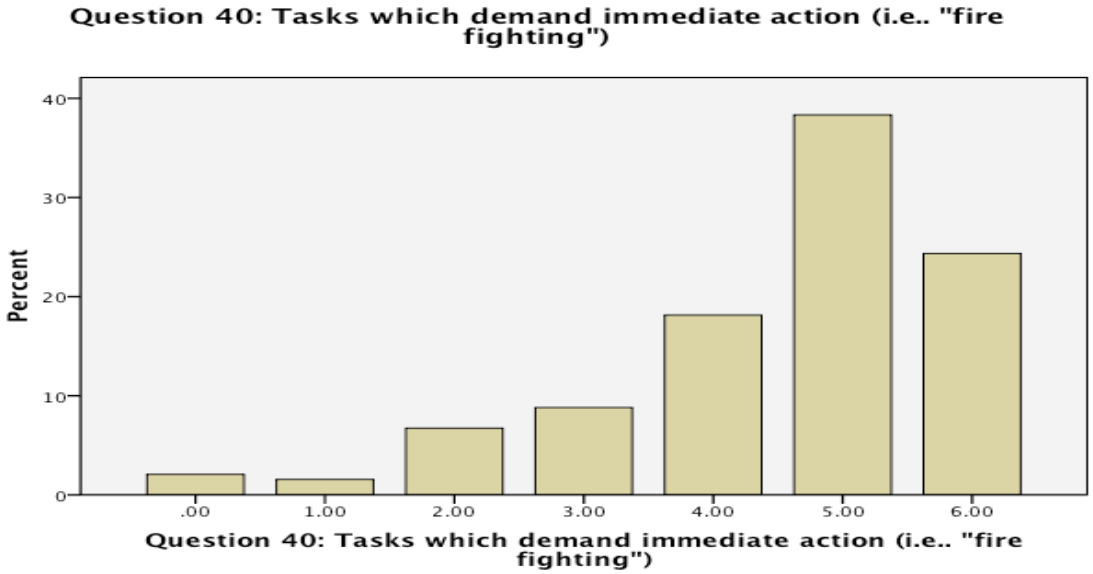
Even fewer analysts work in these units – 48% of work units having less than five FTE policy analysts, a pattern which is similar at both the federal and provincial levels (see Figure 6)

Figure 6: BC Policy Analysts per Policy Shop



Significantly, these analysts are also largely involved in fire-fighting on a day-to-day basis – 63% reporting they work daily or weekly on short-term issues vs only 34% reporting working on issues lasting longer than one year (See Figure 7). This is similar to the pattern for federal officials working in the regions, but not for analysts working in Ottawa (Wellstead, et al 2007).

Figure 7: BC Policy Task Orientation



Provincial policy analysts fall into one of four types – Researchers (40%), Managers (20%), Evaluators (20%), and Consulters (20%). This is quite different from the pattern at the federal level where Wellstead et al (2007) identified two main types: "Troubleshooters vs Planners (see Table 1).

Table 1: Four Basic Types of Provincial Policy Analysts

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Question 21: Appraise policy options	.740			
Question 21: Collect policy-related data or information	.834			
Question 21: Conduct policy-related research	.839			
Question 21: Identify policy issues	.763			
Question 21: Identify policy options	.837			
Question 21: Implement or deliver policies or programs			.607	
Question 21: Negotiate with stakeholders on policy matters		.551		
Question 21: Negotiate with central agencies on policy matters		.779		
Question 21: Negotiate with program managers on policy matters		.735		
Question 21: Consult with the public on policy matters				.699
Question 21: Consult with stakeholders on policy matters				.818
Question 21: Prepare reports. briefs or presentations for decision-makers on policy matters	.698			
Question 21: Consult with decision-makers on policy matters	.545			
Question 21: Brief lower or mid-level policy managers	.553			
Question 21: Brief high level decision-makers such as cabinet ministers. ministerial staff. senior managers		.661		
Question 21: Evaluate policy results and outcomes			.735	
Question 21: Evaluate policy processes and procedures			.806	

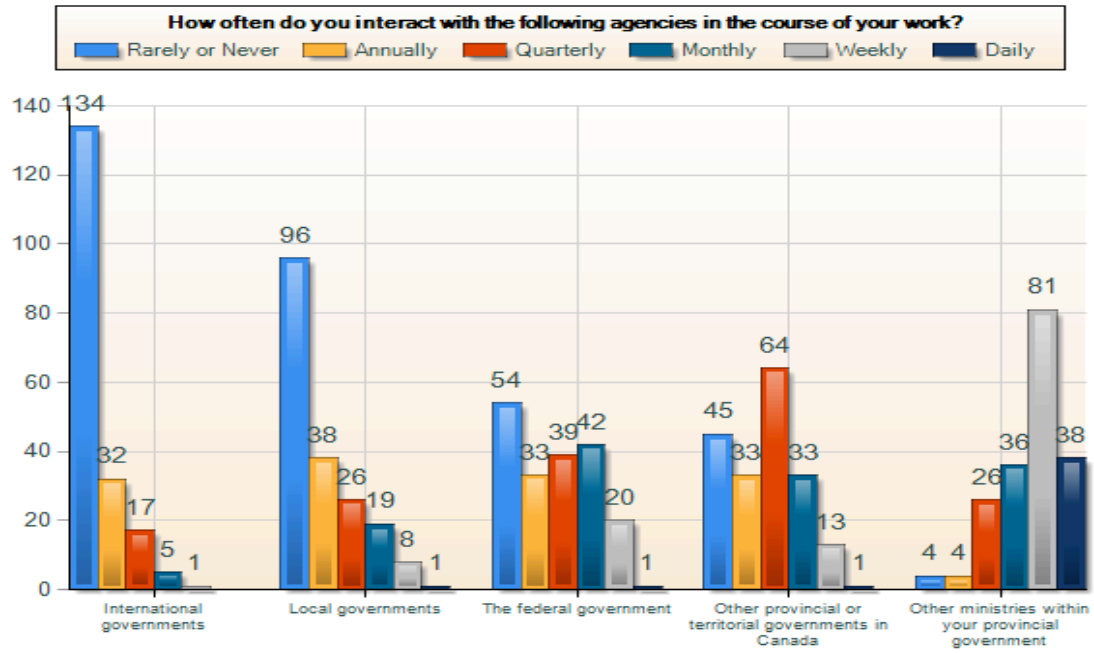
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Interactions

In terms of day-to-day work interactions most provincial analysts in BC have few or no interactions with other governments, although they have a much higher frequency of cross-government contacts than the provincial average (36%) (See Figure 8).

Figure 8: Cross-Governmental Interactions



And (Figures 9 and 10), they interact mainly with headquarters (again a typical provincial pattern).

Figure 9: Regional and Headquarters Interactions

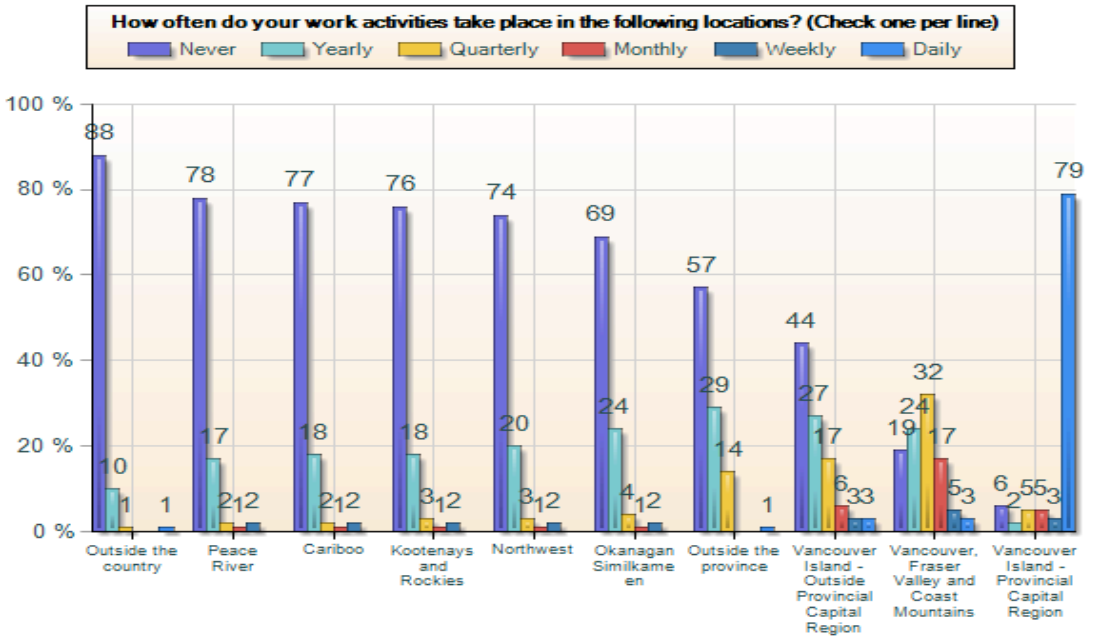
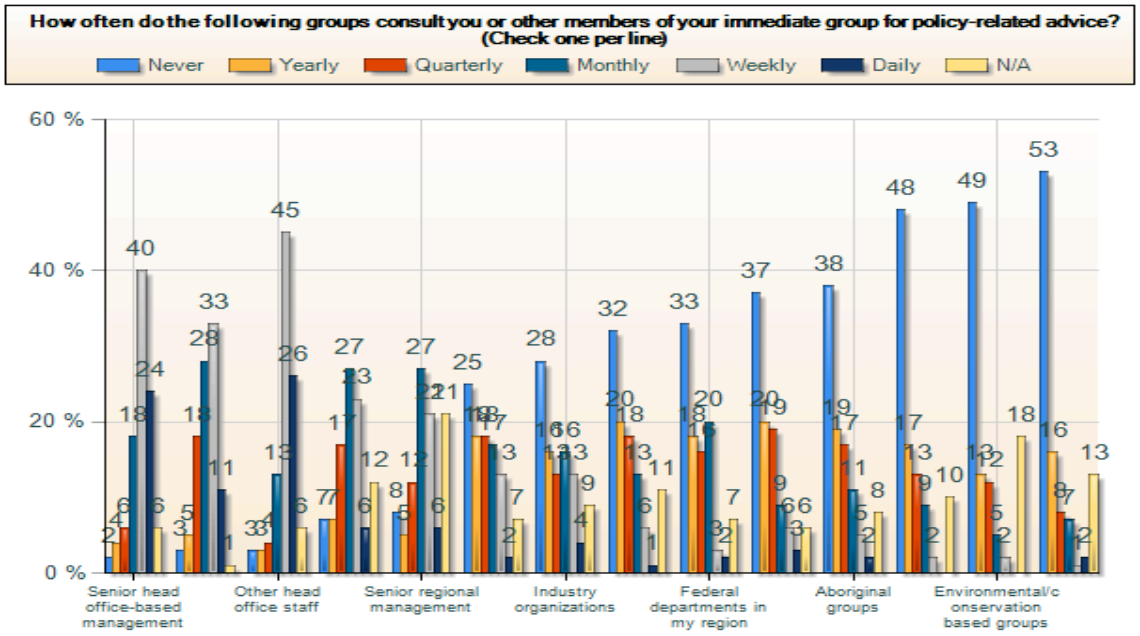
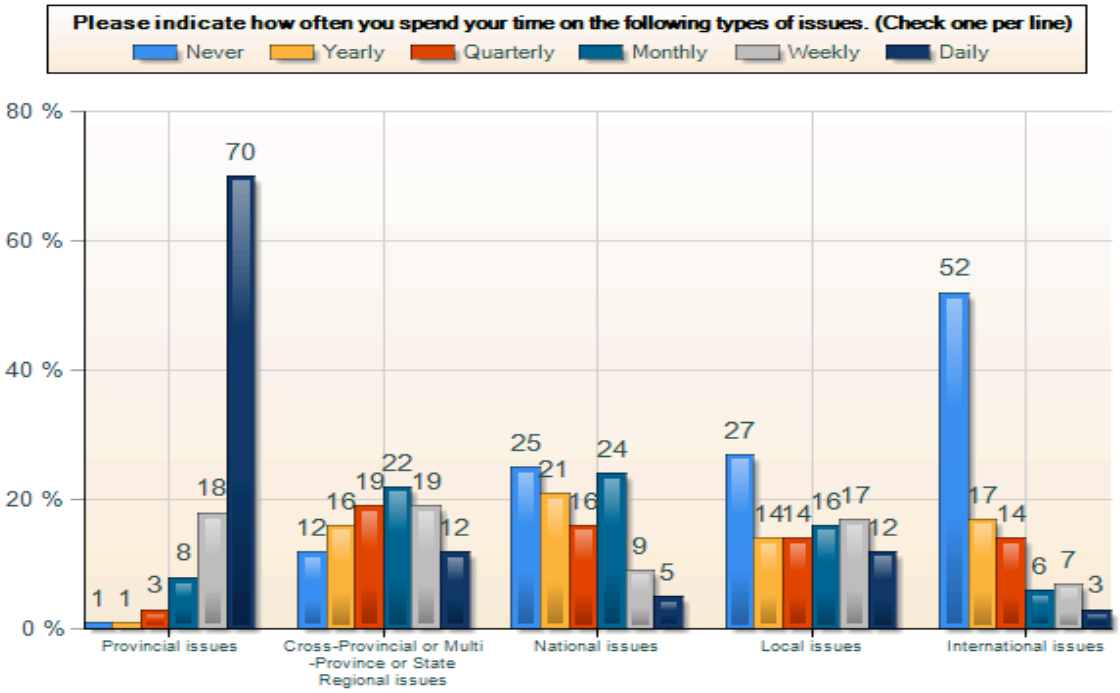


Figure 10: Intra and Extra-Governmental Contacts



These interactions are mainly on provincial-level issues (see Figure 11)

Figure 11: Level of Issue Types

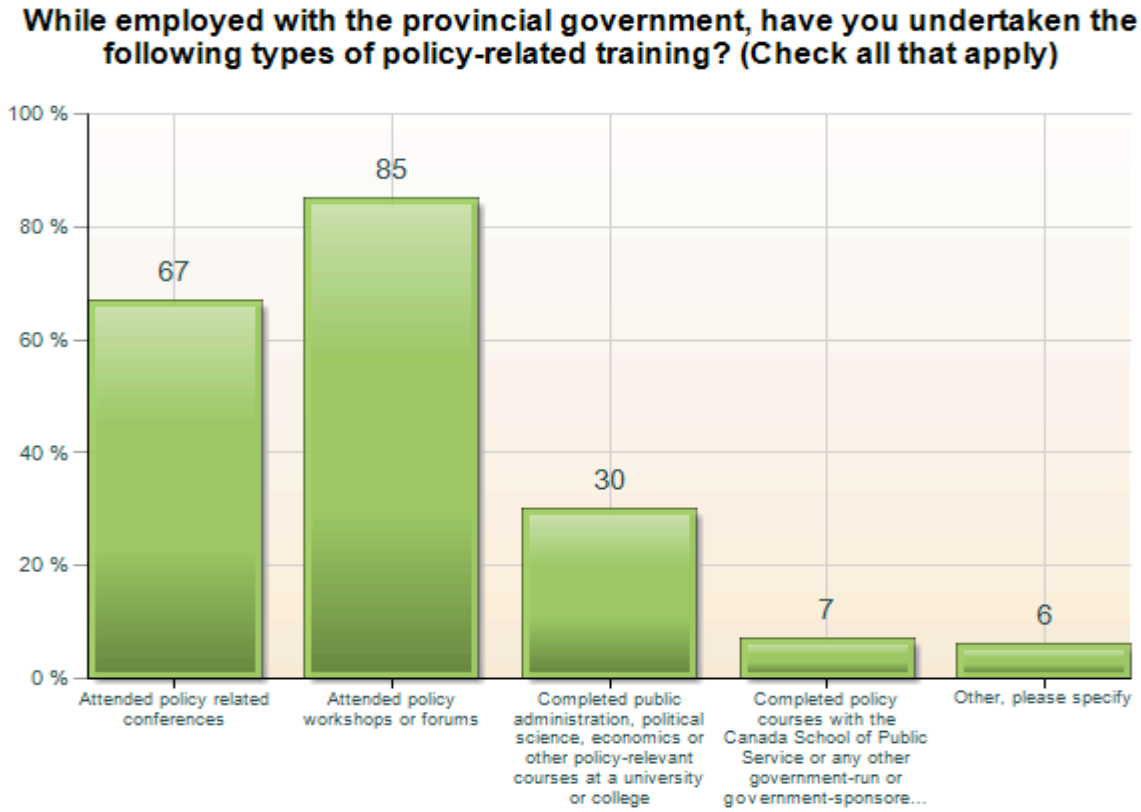


Training

What about training? These analysts are all highly educated (87% University degree, 57% graduate or professional degree), mainly with social science and arts degrees (only 15 % natural and other sciences), This is quite typical of Canadian analysts at both levels of government.

The typical pattern in BC, however, is for analysts to have very little outside policy training (44% never took any policy specific courses at the Post-Secondary level and only 33% took three or more. 61% never completed any specific courses on formal policy analysis or evaluation). Again this is quite typical of provincial analysts but was not included in the Federal survey.

Figure 12: Sources of Provincial Training

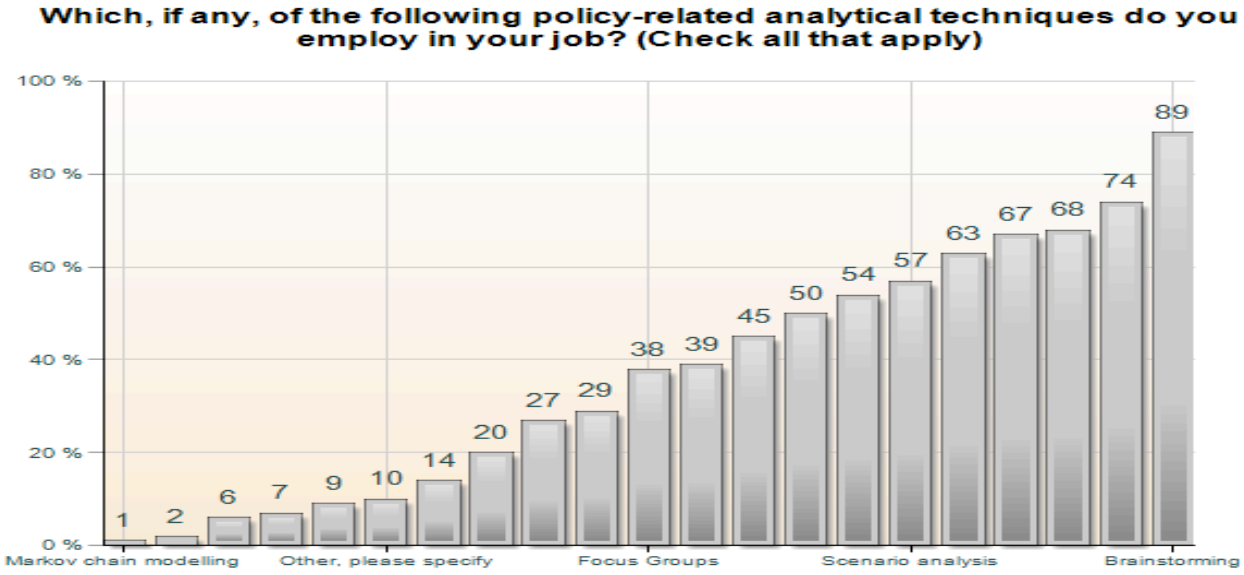


More surprisingly, however, they also have little internal policy training (40% participated in some federal or provincial career training but 76% never took any formal internal governmental training on policy analysis or evaluation. This is much higher than the provincial norm of 55%. The most common form of policy-related training is attending conferences, workshops and forums - but note there is also a higher level of completion of external courses than the provincial average (20%) (See Figure 12).

Techniques

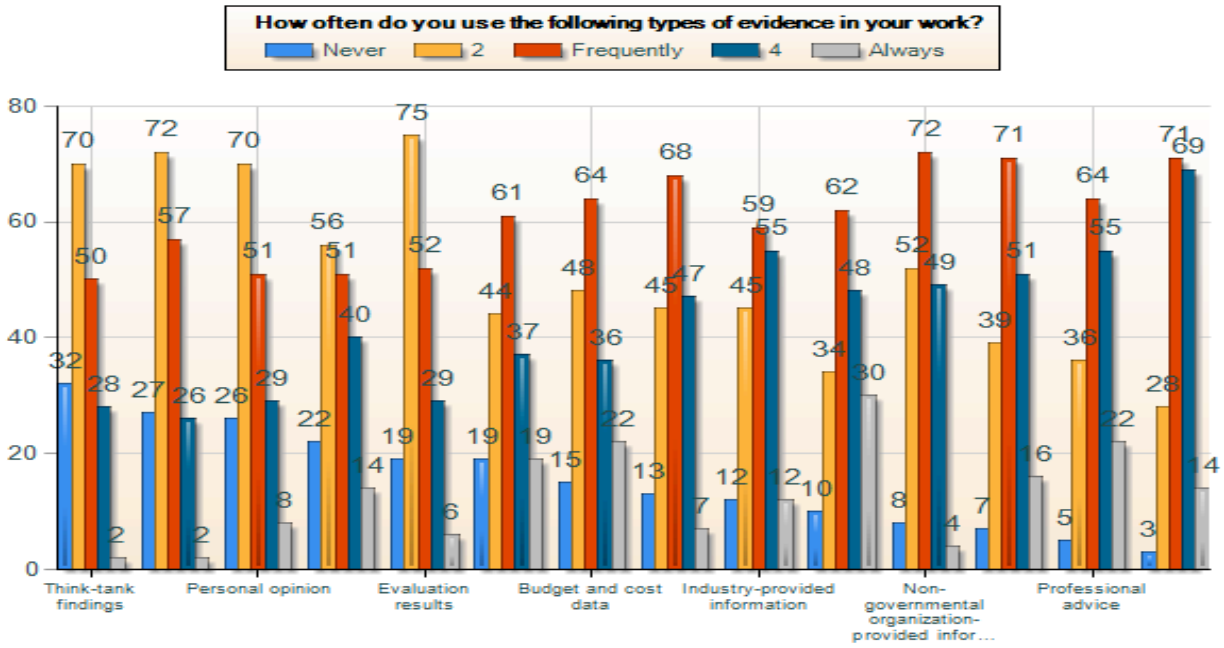
In terms of analytical techniques used, BC analysts generally use very simple/informal/non-technical techniques (see Figure 13). However the specific type depends on the type of analyst (e.g. Evaluators vs Consulters &etc.).

Figure 13: Analytical Techniques Employed



BC analysts use varied sources of information - but with a different emphasis by policy stage (see Figure 14).

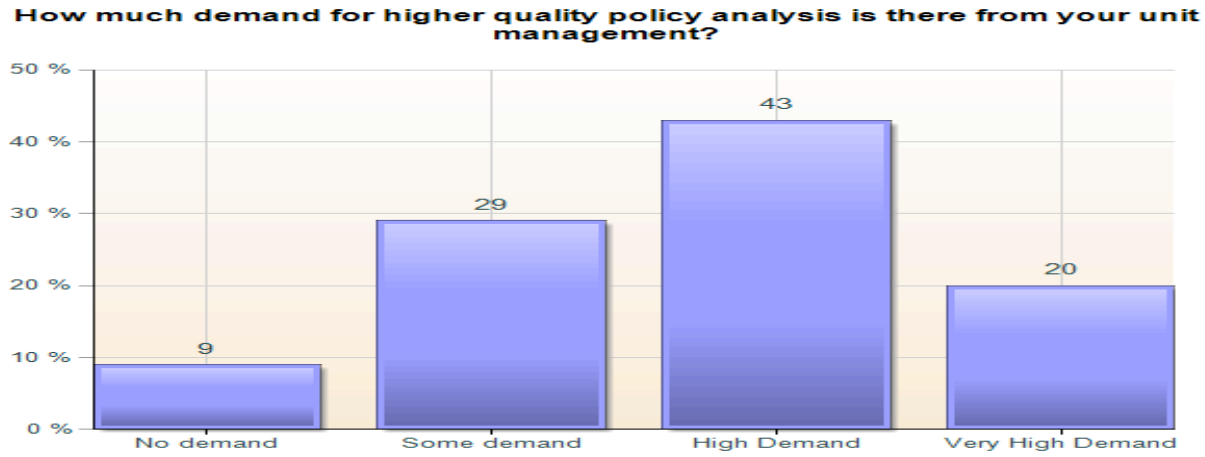
Figure 14: Sources of Information Employed



Demand

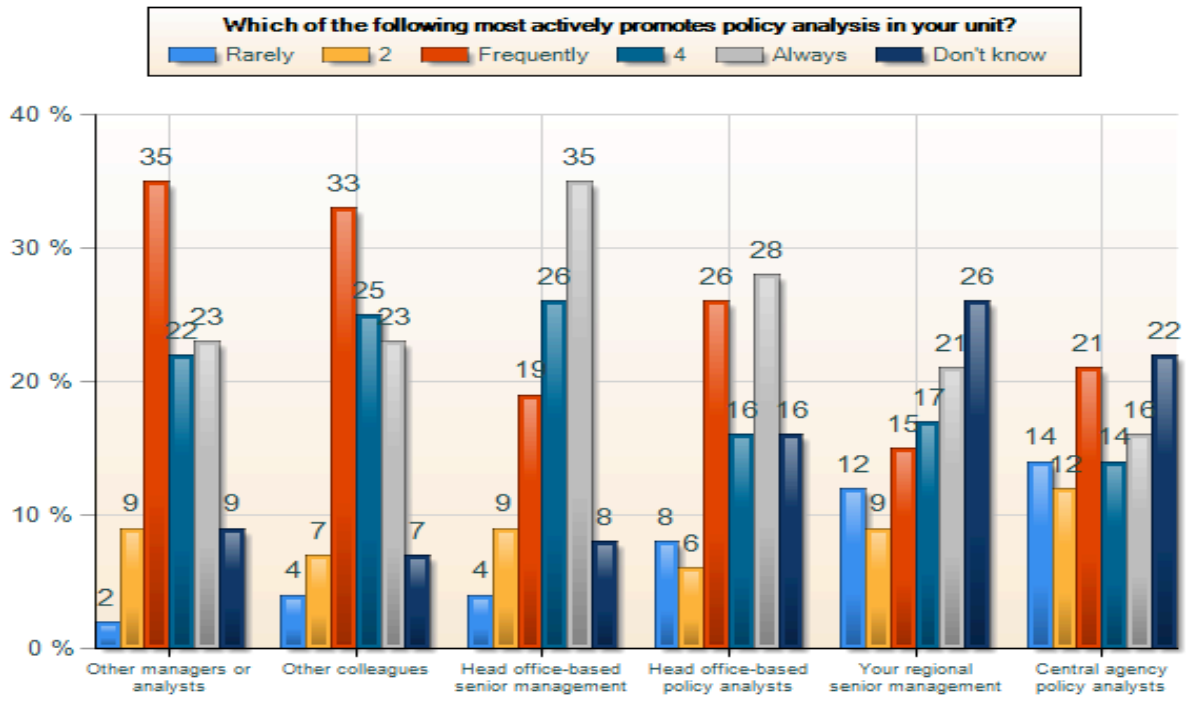
Finally, what about the demand-side of the policy advice equation? Generally demand for high quality analysis is perceived to be quite significant and demand in BC (43%) is higher than the provincial average (33%) (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Demand for High Quality Policy Analysis



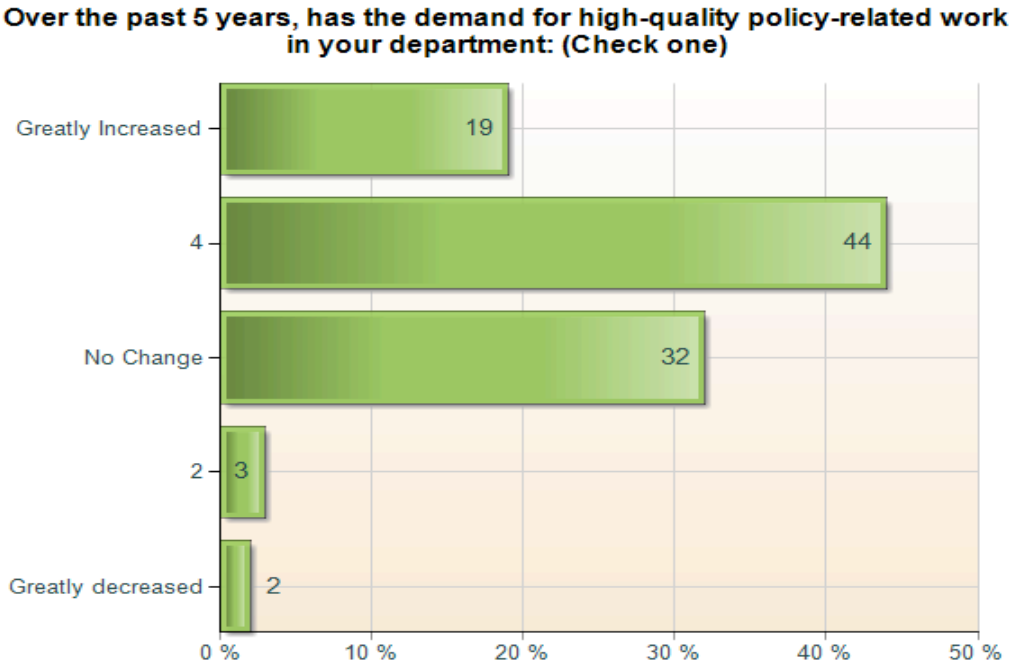
This demand originates with both peers and managers – unlike other provinces where it comes mainly from management (see Figure 15)

Figure 15: Source of Demand



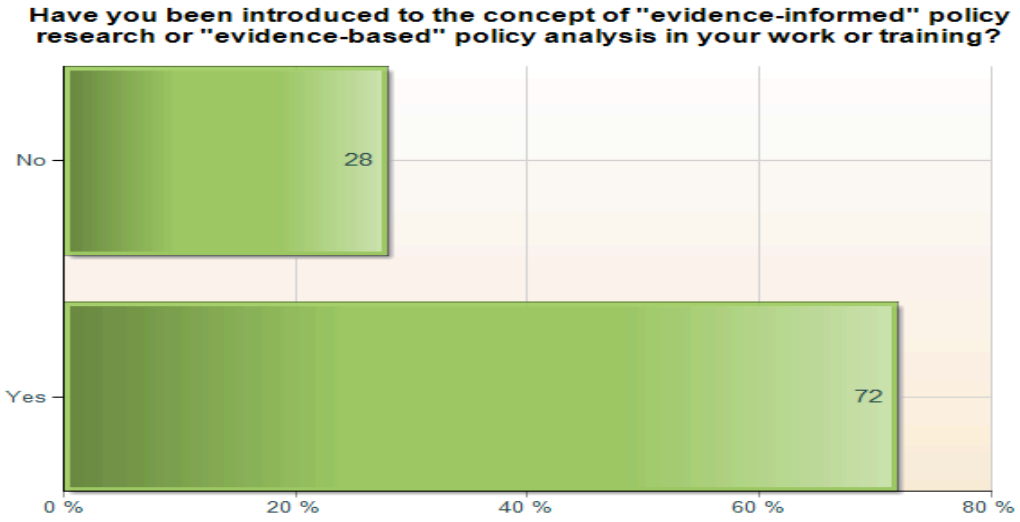
And this level of demand is perceived to be Increasing (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Trends in Demand



Some of this represents an increase in the demand for 'Evidence-Based" policy analysis – 72% in BC know of the term vs 67% in other provinces (not asked in Federal survey) (see Figure 17).

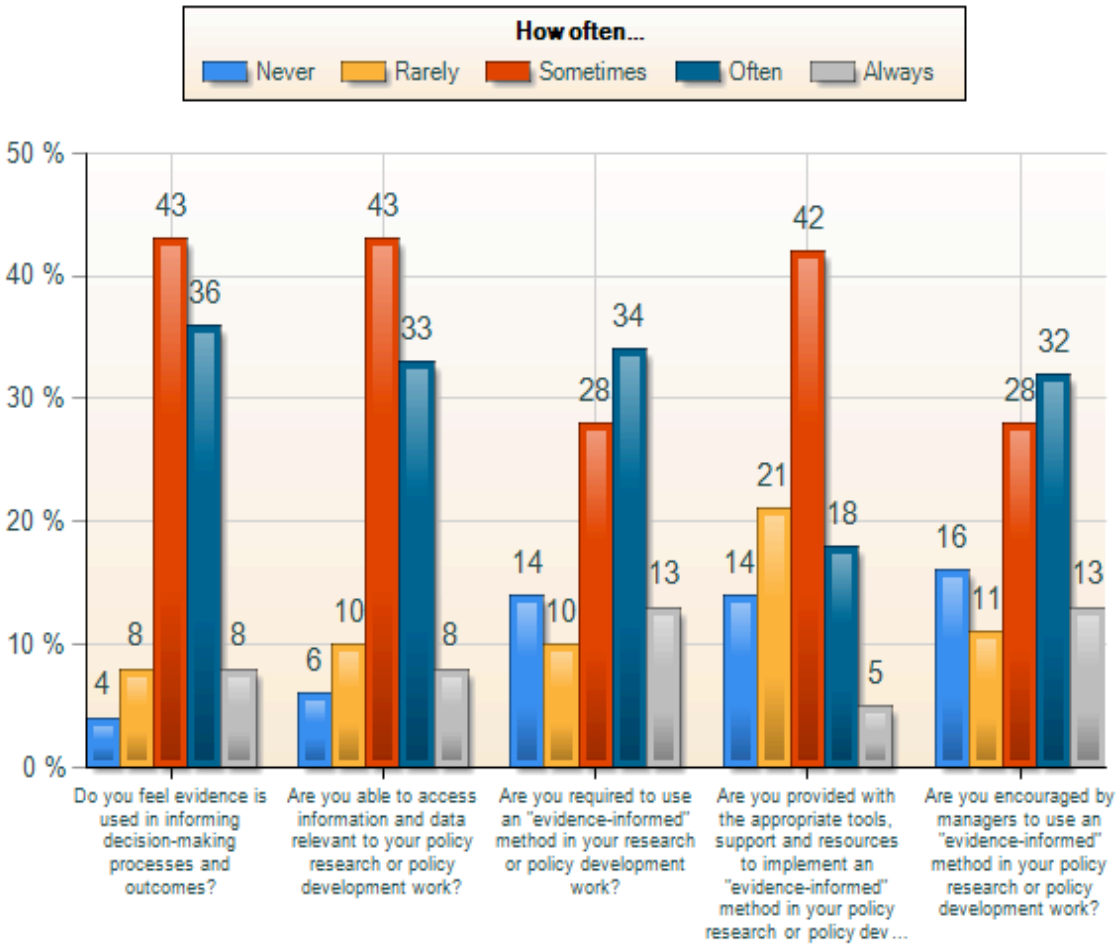
Figure 17: Awareness of Evidence-Based Policy Movement



The most common sources of Evidence used in Agenda-Setting is Agency or Government Strategic Plans (30% report use) followed by Consultation with affected parties (11%) and with ministers (10%). At Policy Formulation it is 17% Consultation with affected parties and 16% Best Practices Research. At Decision-Making it is 20% Consultation with Ministers and 16% Consultation with Affected Parties. In Policy Implementation it is 25% Consultation with Affected Parties and 13% Best Practices Research. Finally, in Policy Evaluation is 24% Feedback on outcomes, 22% outcomes data and 11% Consultations with Affected Parties

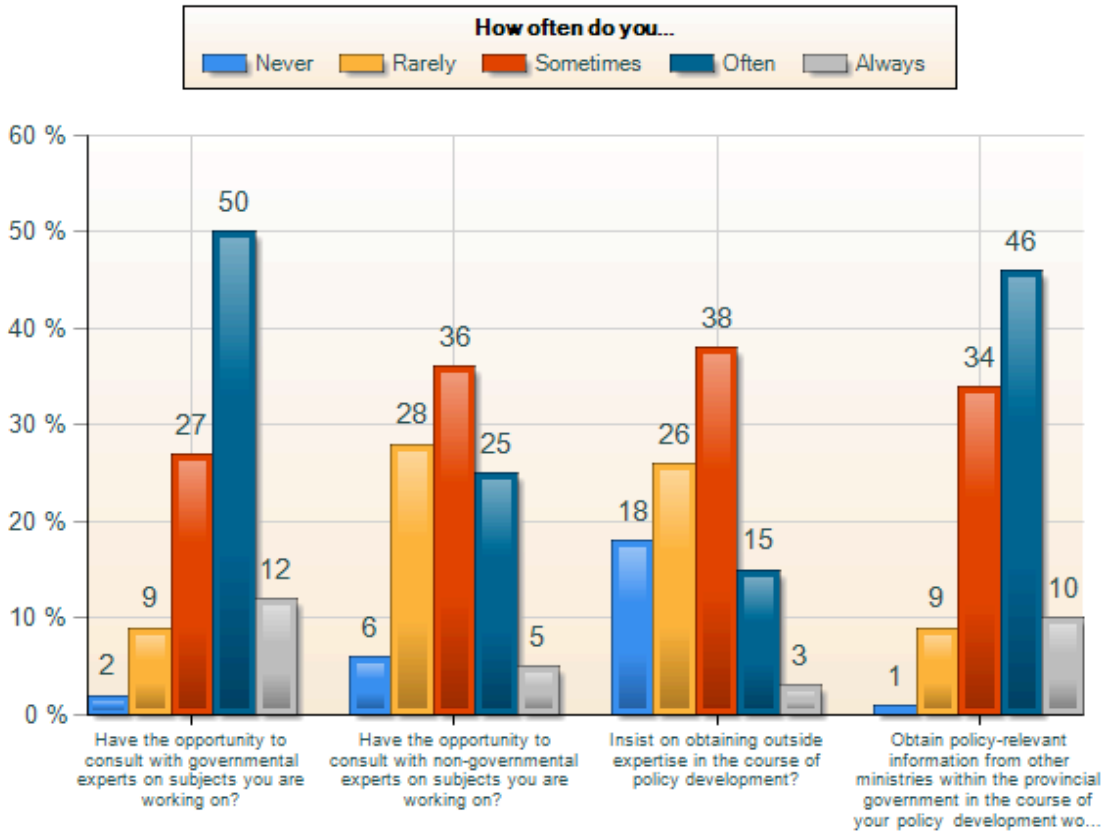
But provision of tools lags behind demand – 35% claim they are rarely or never provided with appropriate tools to implement evidence-based analysis (Average) (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Evidence-Based Policy making



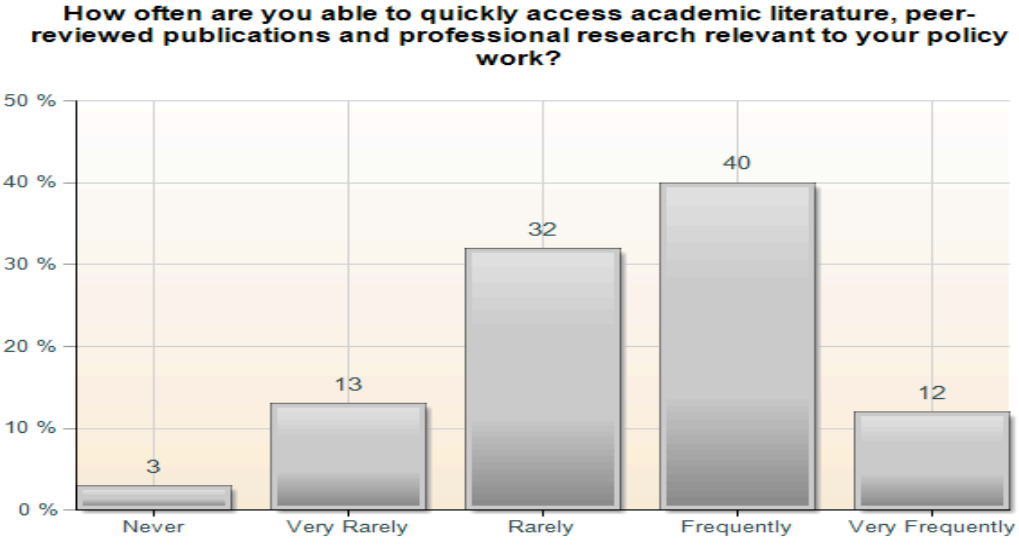
And the main resource that is lacking is access to outside government expertise – 34% rarely or never have opportunity for consultations outside government (above provincial average of 30%) (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: Availability of Information from Various Sources



And 48% rarely or never access peer reviewed or professional research (slightly below the provincial average of 52%) (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: Availability of High Quality Information



Conclusion

Provincial policy analysts in many ways fit the profile of process-oriented troubleshooters. They tend to be relatively young and well educated, from a social science background, relatively inexperienced and untrained in formal policy analysis or analytical techniques, work in small policy shops located in the Provincial Capital working on exclusively provincial issues work almost exclusively within their own government and with Headquarters officials, are often primarily engaged in fire-fighting activities on a day-to-day basis and lack access to academic or professional literature in their subject areas.

BC Policy Analysts share all of these above characteristics. However BC Policy Analysts have some differences from their counterparts in other provinces. They are unusually highly likely to be female, for example, and are more mobile or transient than their federal and provincial counterparts. They also have a higher degree of cross-governmental interactions. But they have less internal government training once in government although higher levels of external (University & College) training. They also face higher demands for higher quality and evidence-based policy-making than their provincial counterparts and are encouraged in these developments by their peers as much as by their managers. *These characteristics all underline and emphasize the short-term, trouble-shooting characteristics of BC analysts* and show some reactions to it (esp. peer support and seeking external training once on the job).

In general, however, policy analytical capacity in BC is still seen to be relatively high by respondents and features strong managerial demand. But, the short-term work orientation is an issue as is lack of access to professional information – higher levels of demand for longer-term analyses require provision of better informational resources and more opportunities for internal training. In this last regard, the top three areas highlighted by respondents for better training were: 1. Techniques of Policy Evaluation (69% "would benefit greatly) 2. Evidence-Based Policy-Making (67%) 3. Strategic and Operational Planning (66%).

Provision of instruction in these areas would no doubt enhance present levels of analytical capacity in the provincial policy bureaucracy and would enhance its capacity for both improved short-term trouble-shooting but also build the basis for longer term strategic planning.

Endnotes

1 Work on this project was carried out under a 2007-2010 SSHRC Standard Research Grant. Additional funding was received from BC Work-Study and Summer Challenge grants and from the Government of British Columbia. Research assistance was provided by Joshua Newman, Mandy Cheema, David Petroziello, Marion Gure, and Malvina Lewandowska. Invaluable assistance and input with survey techniques, pilot testing, questionnaire design, mail list preparation, and analysis was provided by Adam Wellstead, Luc Bernier, Bryan Evans, Wendy Taylor and Coralie Breen.

2 The policy advice system that supplies information to governments is, of course, very complex and includes many sources of information, from friends to spouses and close advisors (Meltsner 1990). However, alongside personal opinion and experience exists a more formal policy advice system which purports to deliver knowledge and expertise to governments. This supply network is composed of sources both within government such as professional policy analysts employed in departments and agencies and political advisors attached to minister's offices and central agencies and external to government ranging from private sector consultants to experts in think tanks, universities, political parties, and elsewhere (Boston 1994; Boston et al. 1996).

3 A survey of policy analysts employed by provincial civil services was carried out in November and December of 2008 using an online commercial software service. It involved the completion of a 64-item questionnaire by more than 1,200 provincial and territorial civil servants situated in seven jurisdictions. Overall there are close to 350 variables examined. Mailing lists for the survey were compiled wherever possible from publicly available

sources such as online government telephone directories, using keyword searches for terms such as "policy analyst" appearing in job titles or descriptions. In some cases additional names were added to lists from hard-copy sources such as government organization manuals. In other cases lists or additional names were provided by provincial public service commissions, who also checked initial lists for completeness and accuracy.3 Lists were compiled for as many provinces and territories as possible, with the aim of obtaining comprehensive lists for at least one major Canadian province, at least one mid-sized jurisdiction, one smaller jurisdiction, and at least one territory. From 2,846 valid email addresses in seven jurisdictions, 1,258 valid survey completions were gathered for a total response rate of 44.2%. The BC survey was piloted in October 2008, revised and then conducted on a list of approximately 515 civil servants in November and December 2008. The response rate in the BC case was 48.5%.

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