

Careful argument can improve IA processes

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Summary

There have long been complaints about the time and complexity involved in IA processes, from field work to public participation to review to report writing and ultimately to the policy-making that depends on the earlier steps. While many support the goal of improved efficiency in principle, concerns are strong about losing detail or compromising trust by changing standard processes.

This presentation discusses how adding well tested but not well-known tools of argument, even without changes in rules or standard methods, can clarify and improve focus in the assessment and policy-making processes. An argument is a set of reasons that lead to and support a conclusion. Arguments are more pervasive in IA than many people realize. Baseline studies and effects predictions are fact arguments, significance determinations are evaluation arguments and mitigation and follow up are recommendation arguments. But different kinds of argument require different steps, many of which are often not provided, hence the vagueness of many documents. More data is not needed. Much information turns out to be ‘true, but not relevant’ to a specific conclusion and could be omitted. Some information would not even be gathered if a structured ‘argument outline’ was prepared early. Tools of clear argument make steps of thinking and analysis clearer on the page, so the review and policy-making steps are clearer, more effective and more transparent. The documents can be more focused and shorter. Examples of steps of argument that have helped IA projects are provided.

Conference Paper

The main idea of the conference paper, that expands somewhat upon the abstract is:

Argument is not a single silver bullet that can solve all problems with large, complex processes and overly long and unclear documents. However, each of many tools, which can be used alone or together, offers steps which improve clarity, focus and communication. Thus, carefully using many tools of argument will collectively improve the quality and reduce the size of both IA processes and the products.

Final Text

The conference presentation relies heavily on graphics within the PowerPoints. I will revise this posting with a full paper expanding on the title topic after the conference. In the paper I will combine updates based on feedback from the presentation with much more background material than I can present in 15 minutes. I must substitute text for graphics, which do not fit the length requirements of these postings.

Apologies to those who are looking for full details in this preliminary posting.

If you have questions or comments, please contact me at glenn.brown@telus.net.

Thanks for your interest.