Intersection of Evaluation and Data Analytics:
Case Study from a Community-based Organization

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Introduction

Evaluation practices in community settings have evolved due to advancements in data analytic technologies, **including enhanced visualization tools, machine learning**, **natural language processing**, and **artificial intelligence**. These developments have transformed how community-based organizations conduct evaluations and monitor performance. With diverse data sources from management information systems, such as electronic health records and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, organizations can leverage new tools for real-time evaluations, track program performance, and implement data-driven improvements. This influx of data and the demand for real-time insights necessitate a shift from traditional evaluation methods, requiring internal evaluators to integrate data analytic tools to support performance monitoring, program evaluation, and strategic decision-making.

Case Study: Evolution of an Internal Evaluation Department

Organization Overview:

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services offers direct mental health and substance use services to over 6,500 adults and children, reaching approximately 190,000 individuals annually through its crisis line and 32,000 through outreach and training activities. Over the past 12 years, the internal evaluation team has grown from 4 to 17 members, underscoring a heightened focus on program evaluation, performance monitoring, and the integration of data analytics.
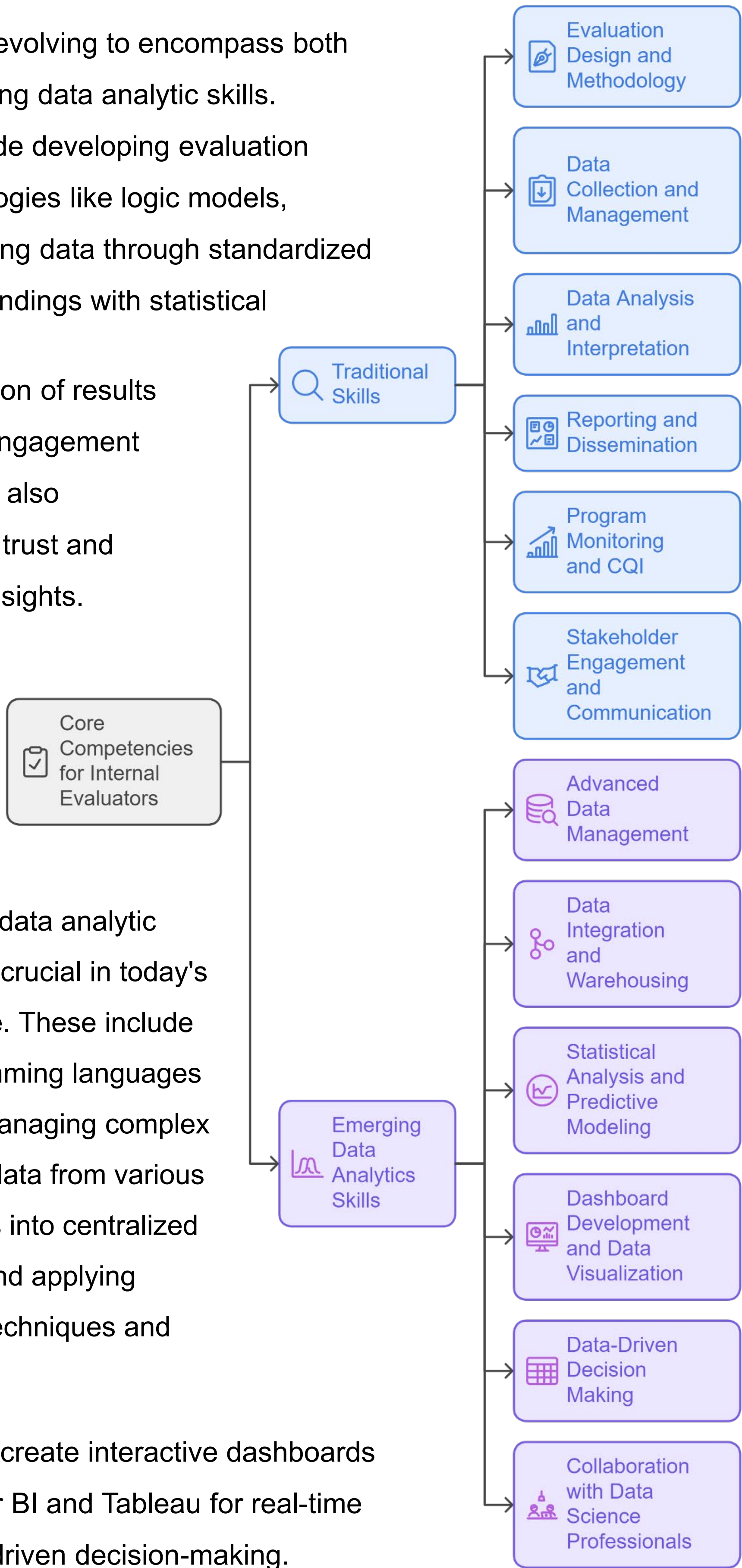
Focus of the Case Study:

This case study examines the organization's transition from a traditional evaluation model to one that integrates data analytics, responding to the increasing demand for real-time, data-driven insights. By expanding the internal evaluation team to include data analytics professionals, the organization aimed to address evolving needs. The experiences of this department highlights key strategies, challenges, and benefits of integrating data science into evaluation practices.

Need for Integration

Integrating data analytics into evaluation can transform traditional retrospective methods into real-time performance monitoring, allowing for faster trend identification and informed decision-making through predictive modeling. This integration maximizes the use of diverse data sources and enhances stakeholder engagement with effective visualizations.

Evolving Core Competencies for Evaluators

Internal evaluation is evolving to encompass both traditional and emerging data analytic skills. Traditional skills include developing evaluation plans using methodologies like logic models, collecting and managing data through standardized tools, and analyzing findings with statistical techniques.

Effective communication of results to stakeholders and engagement with program staff are also essential for fostering trust and ensuring actionable insights.

In contrast, emerging data analytic skills are increasingly crucial in today's data-driven landscape. These include proficiency in programming languages like R or Python for managing complex datasets, integrating data from various management systems into centralized warehouses (SQL), and applying advanced statistical techniques and predictive modeling.

Evaluators must also create interactive dashboards using tools like Power BI and Tableau for real-time monitoring and data-driven decision-making.
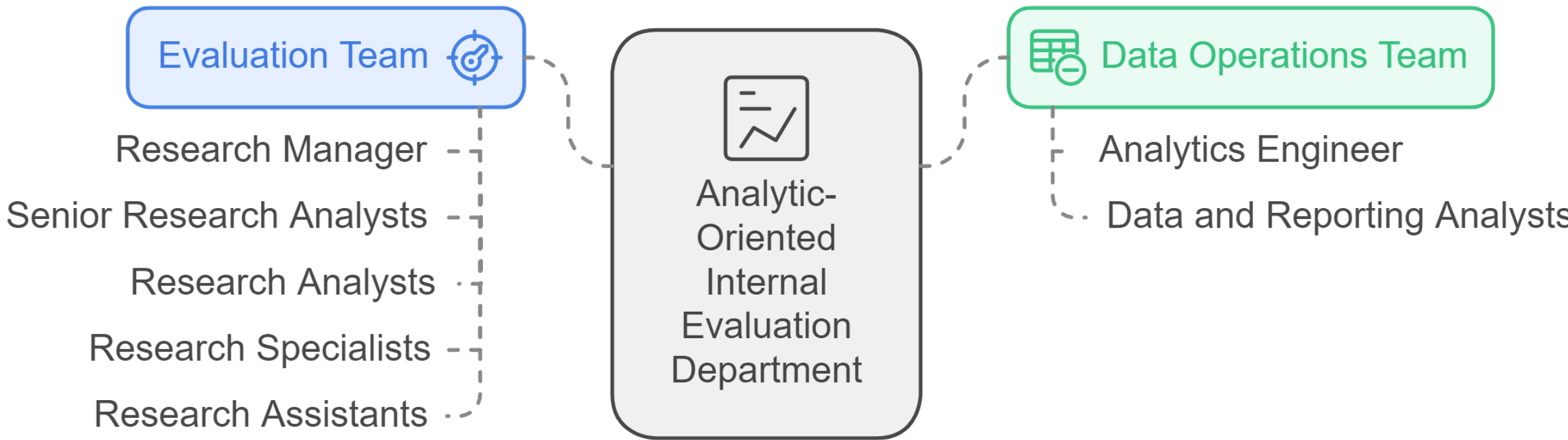

Models for Integration

The organization chose to **expand its internal evaluation team** by incorporating data analytics professionals to ensure that analytics efforts closely align with its specific evaluation needs, fostering seamless communication and timely, actionable insights.

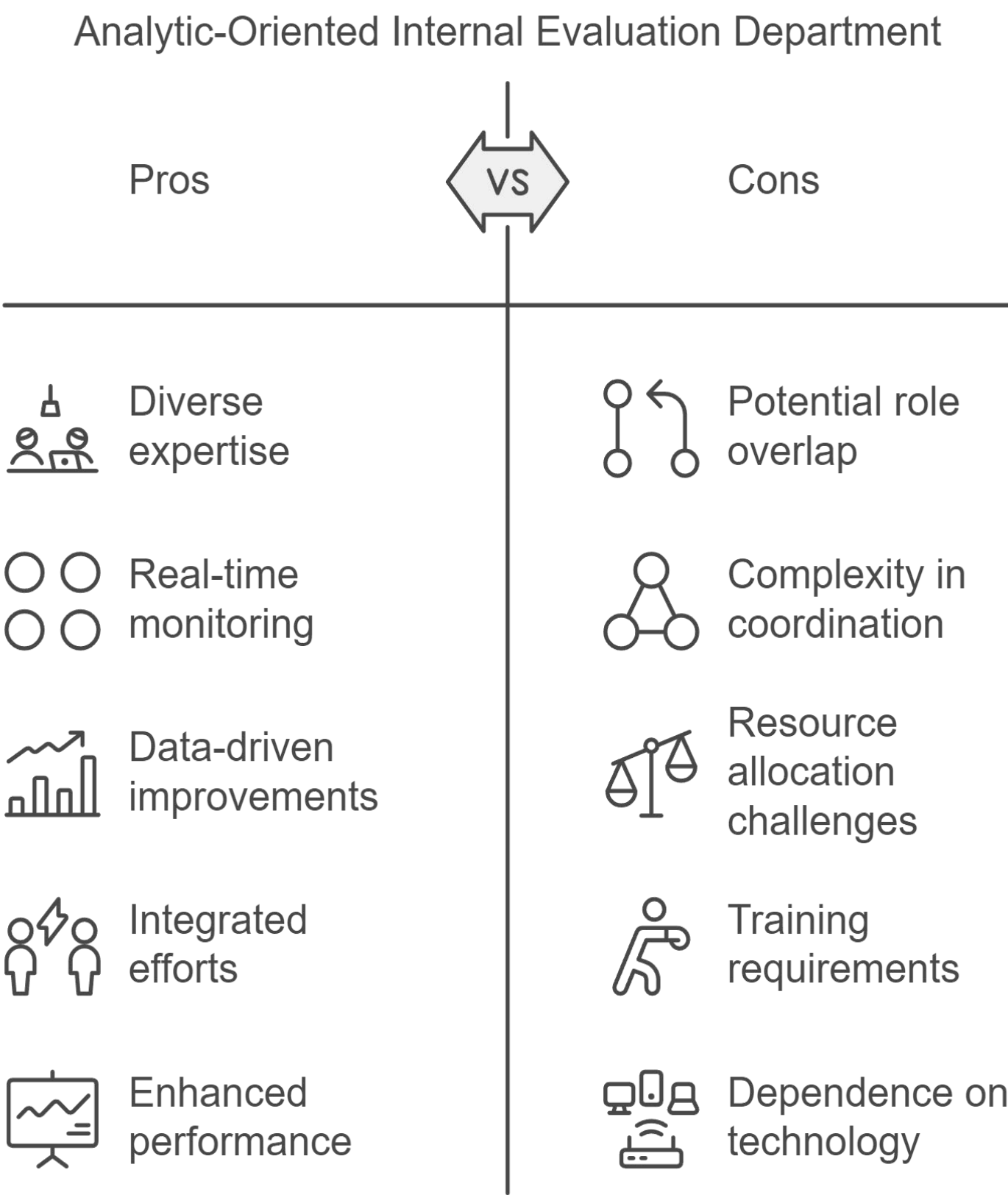## Internal Evaluation Department Structures

Traditional Internal Evaluation Department:

- Focused on program evaluation, primary data collection, and performance monitoring, our traditional internal evaluation department comprised:
  - Research Manager
  - Senior Research Analysts and Research Analysts
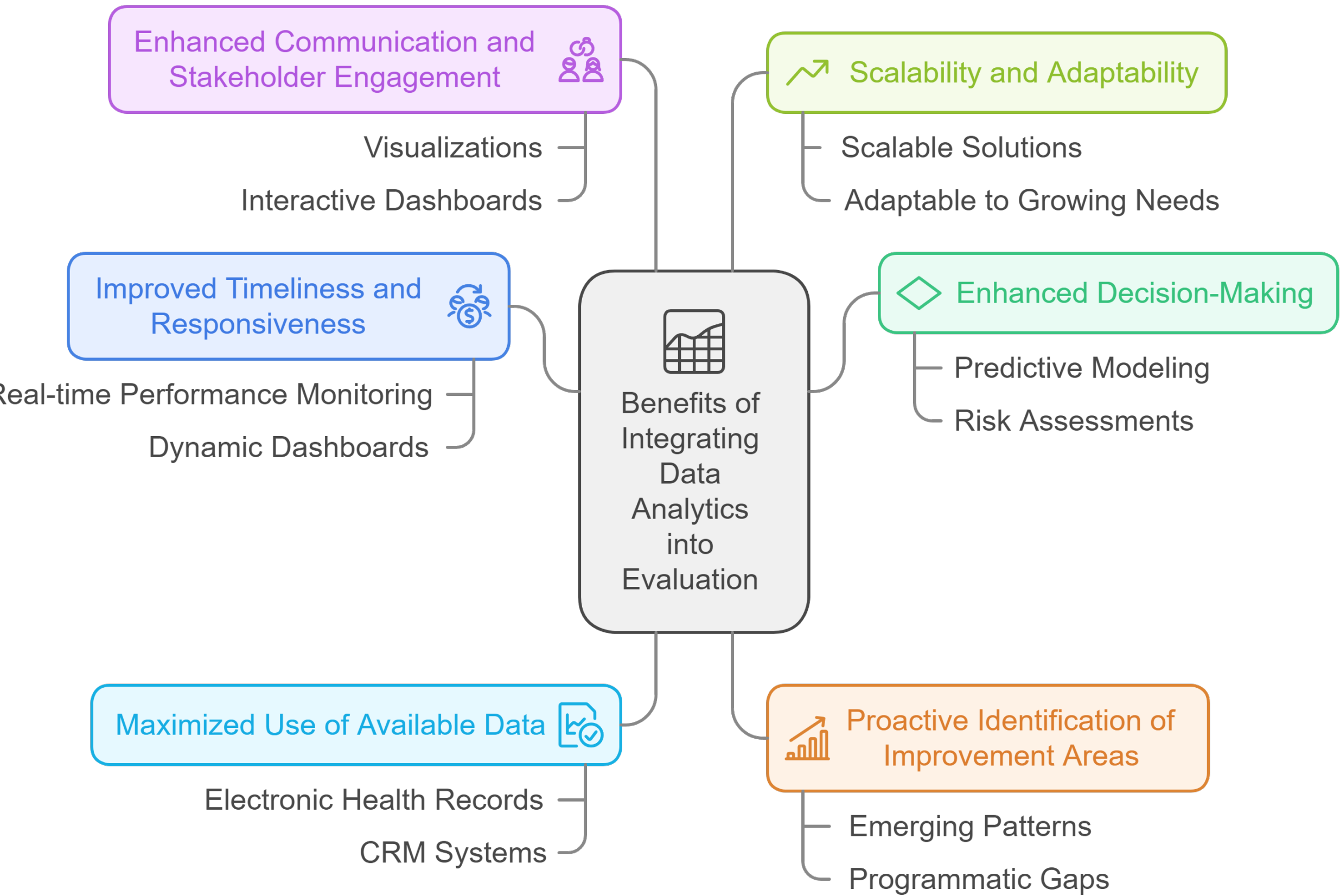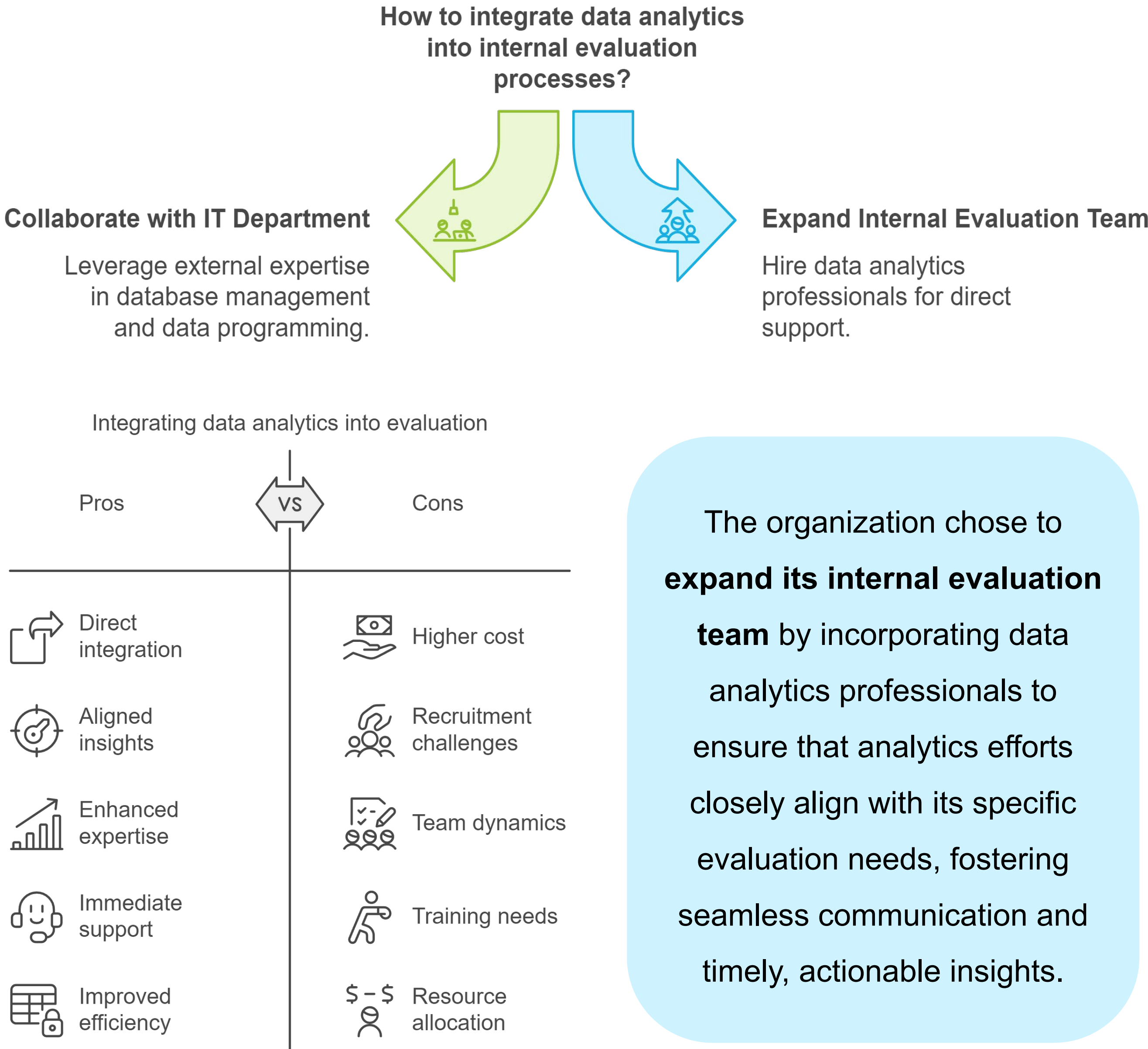 - Research Specialists and Research Assistants

Analytic-Oriented Internal Evaluation Department:

- Expanded department with two distinct teams.
- Evaluation team maintains the same focus as a traditional internal evaluation department.
- **Data Operations team focuses on the integration of data analytics into evaluation efforts, improving analytic capacity, real-time performance monitoring, and data-driven program improvement**.

Considerations for Evaluators

As data science and data analytics continue to transform evaluation practices, it is crucial to understand their implications for internal evaluation. Key areas for evaluators to consider include:

- **Identifying New Skill Sets Needed for Internal Evaluators**: As data analytics becomes a core component of evaluation, evaluators need to cultivate expertise in data programming, data management, data modeling, and advanced data visualization.
- **Developing Strategies to Build Capacity in Data Analytics:** Explore strategies and models for building capacity within internal teams, such as providing professional development opportunities, establishing mentorship programs, or hiring data analytics specialists.
- **Effectively Communicating the Value and Necessity of Evaluation and Data Analytics:** Ensure that stakeholders understand the enhanced value that integrating evaluation and data analytics provides in terms of insight generation, program effectiveness, and strategic decision-making.