

Determining Training Needs

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Since World War II, few if any, staff functions have received as much attention as that of training. It has been the subject of more conferences, programs, books and articles in the past 15-20 years than in any known period of time. Much of the emphasis placed on training during this time is attributed to a recognition of the importance, and often the necessity, of directing the learning of human resources in dynamic organizational environments. Unfortunately, the money, effort, and time invested in training have not always produced the results that many organizations have expected. Why is this true? With ever increasing attention being devoted to the area, why do training programs often result in failure? A survey of the literature in the area of training indicates a possible answer. In the literature, much emphasis is placed on the establishment of training programs, and the benefits to be derived from them. However, a dearth of information is found in the one area

most important to successful training results. This is the area of determining training needs.

Importance of Knowing Training Needs

Many companies that spend much time and money in designing products and carefully planning for production before marketing them, will spend little, if any, time in determining training needs prior to developing a training program. Therefore, training is often misdirected and haphazard and results are not as anticipated.

What many companies fail to recognize is that just as a house must be constructed on a solid foundation, *all* training procedures must be built up from carefully determined needs. The determination of such needs is a prelude to any comprehensive and well-organized training program. These needs provide both the all important objectives which become both focal points toward

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which training processes can be directed, and standards against which performance can be measured. Thus, they are prime determinants in any successful training program.

Approaches to Need Determination

Among organizations that recognize the importance of a program grounded in needs, various approaches have been used in attempting to ascertain training needs. Some approaches have been entirely subjective while others have been extremely objective. Still others have built their evaluations around both the subjective and objective approaches.

The Subjective Approach

This approach has been, and still is, used in the nebulous area of evaluating various traits which individuals are assumed to need before becoming successful. Naturally, one of the first questions that arises in the utilization of the subjective appraisal is, "what traits do successful people possess?" An attempt to answer this question should, in itself, point out the inadequacy of a subjective analysis of personnel. This is especially true when it is considered that an individual's traits, even if they can be isolated, do not necessarily determine his success on the job. Thus, a further weakness of the subjective approach can be seen. That is, if too much reliance is placed on "successful traits," the more objective evaluations of on-the-job performance are ignored. Hence, training based on a subjective analysis is frequently misdirected. An individual's personality traits may be changed, if possible, through training and he may be-

come a "good Joe," but his on-the-job performance may not be improved at all.

The Objective Approach

Some organizations have abandoned the subjective approach in favor of a more concrete and factual analysis of training needs. This is the objective approach. It involves the establishment of standards of performance for various individuals and/or departments. Deviations from these standards become "warning signals" that point out a need for corrective action. If standards are met, everything is assumed to be operating satisfactorily—including personnel.

The shortcomings inherent in this approach are numerous. First, standards are often inadequate in that they involve areas of performance in which individuals may have little control. Thus, deviations from standards may not be influenced by the human element. Consequently, training needs cannot be accurately determined. Secondly, even though standards are met, the subjective approach does not point out training needs that may exist beyond the realm of present job performance. Third, too much emphasis may be placed on the accomplishment of a given standard without any regard being given to the specific elements of performance necessary in attaining that standard.

The Integrative Approach

The value of the integrative approach lies in its combination of both the subjective and objective approaches. This combination allows one approach to be used in implementing and supplementing the other. Objective data can be used in verifying and expanding that of a subjective nature and vice-versa. The

objective of such an approach is to obtain as much information about each employee as is possible. Ideally, the accumulation of this objective data should begin during the selection process. Application blanks, reference checks, test results, interview reports, etc., provide important sources of information to be used in ascertaining training needs. Other methods, however, are equally important since they add to an increased understanding of the information gained from an employee's preliminary contact with the organization.

Integrative Approach Elements

The following elements of the integrative approach are designed to implement one another so that an integrated picture of an employee's training needs will result.

1. *Analysis of Past Experience*—An analysis of past experience is a basic ingredient in comparing an applicant's qualifications against job specifications. In this area, certain training needs for a particular job become apparent. However, information concerning experience is equally important in determining future training needs. For example, what training is necessary to make an employee a qualified applicant for promotion? Typical questions in this area are, "what is his past pattern of accomplishments, has his work performance been satisfactory in the past, does he have a record of promotions, etc.?"

2. *Analysis of Present Performance*.—In addition to an evaluation of past experience, present job performance should also be analyzed. Such an analysis is necessary to see if past performance trends have continued in the present or

if they may have changed. Thus, this analysis provides an opportunity to integrate experience and performance in terms of both past and present. Also, it provides a basis for forecasting what might be expected from a person in the future. In any event, it shows areas in which an individual may need additional training.

3. *Analysis of Expected Future Performance*.—While a knowledge of past and present performance is important in determining training needs, future job demands must also be considered. With an understanding of an employee's experience from these three time spans, an integrated picture results. It is easier to see for what positions a person will be most qualified and what training he might need to be most successful in a new endeavor.

Integrative Approach Data Gathering

Many sources might be used in accumulating data on an individual's performance through time. Some of the more important are:

1. Personal resume
2. Testing
3. Appraisals by both superiors and subordinates
4. Follow-up on new workers
5. Worker morale
6. Interviews
7. Suggestions from within the organization
8. Present methods of instruction
9. Personal needs of executives
10. Provisions for future employees
11. Meeting the firm's objectives
12. Technological advancement within the industry
13. Rate of growth of the firm

14. Comparison with other firms
15. Suggestions from outside the organization

1. *Personal Resume or Data Sheet.*—A valuable means of determining training needs is a comparison of information available for employees on their personal resume with the skills and experiences necessary for the job they are expected to do. Job descriptions and the job “specs” should indicate the skills and experiences that a worker needs to satisfactorily perform each job. If skill and experience are inadequate, the employee should be trained in such a way that his job qualifications will become satisfactory. Experience plus training equals a desirable employee.

2. *Testing.*—There are, or should be, job descriptions and job “specs” for each job within a firm. Test results compared with the minimum requirements necessary for each job can point out areas requiring a need for training. Underqualified employees may possibly become qualified in some cases through proper training.

3. *Appraisals by Both Superiors and Subordinates.*—Appraisals such as performance ratings, made by immediate superiors as well as associates on the same organizational level are necessary in order to obtain more objective and accurate results. Such results are derived through an analysis of an employee’s strengths and weaknesses as seen from various angles. Also, this method eliminates “gaps” in the analysis since the data from one appraiser implements and supplements that of another.

4. *Follow-up on New Workers.*—Follow-up interviews with new workers can

give management some indication of the success of their present attempts to train new workers. Lack of understanding of various organization processes may appear. There may be special problems which have not been adequately handled in the training program. These problems may then be handled as they arise by proper changes in the training program.

5. *Worker Morale.*—Indications of low morale may be in the form of absenteeism, grievances, lack of cooperation, poor communication, high rate of employee turnover, etc. A low morale problem may be lessened by letting the employee know why his job is important, how his work ties in with the rest of the workers, how he can improve himself by doing his job better, why it is good for him to help the company, and why his boss has him doing the job he is doing. There is a host of other information which, when properly given to the employee, will raise his morale and that of the entire work force. Low worker morale is often a sign of inadequate training.

6. *Interviews.*—By proper use of the interview technique, a firm may learn some of the glaring weaknesses which could be overcome by proper training. Through interviews the company can analyze the employee’s feelings toward his duties, progress, promotion possibilities, supervisors, fellow workers, working conditions, and his general attitude toward the company. This is an important source of information which is too commonly overlooked.

7. *Suggestions from Within the Organization.*—Management can to some extent determine its training needs by

listening to the suggestions of its employees. Conferences with line supervisors may reveal weaknesses that could be alleviated by a training program. A suggestion system for all employees may also reveal weaknesses which should be considered in a training program. Another means of getting suggestions from within the organization is a "tap in" on the "grape-vine." This sometimes reveals needs that would not otherwise be discovered. In short, there are many means of getting information from within the organization. These can be, and should be, used as aids in determining training needs.

8. *Present Methods of Instruction.*—In those firms which have a training program of some kind it would be well to try to determine whether or not the instructors are actually teaching the workers. What planning and teaching techniques are being used? Are they the best for the situation? Are the instructors teaching the right thing? Could the present methods of instruction be improved? Are the right persons doing the instructing? A training program *per se* is no guarantee of favorable results in terms of employee learning. The design and maintenance of the training program are of crucial significance. Even the best conceived program will need change and modification to keep up with the dynamic nature of the organizational processes.

9. *Personal Needs of Executives.*—A systematic evaluation of the personal needs of executives may reveal training needs. To accomplish such an evaluation there must be an organization chart with detailed job specifications for each executive. From such information *each*

executive can be evaluated in terms of *his* job requirements. Weaknesses may be revealed which could be overcome with proper development. The United States Rubber Company is among those companies using this type of management appraisal to determine training needs.

10. *Provisions for Future Employees.*—Again from the organization chart a firm can partially determine its future needs for employees—especially at the executive level. This can be done by showing in chart form the number of years each executive will be with the firm before retirement. Retirement is inevitable and each firm should be training replacements for those who will retire. In an expanding industry there must be provisions for the training of additional executives as well as for replacements. In an expanding business the requirements for executives are great. Thus, training needs can be determined by analyzing *future needs* for employees.

11. *Meeting the Firm's Objective.*—A firm may have as one of its objectives the goal to provide recognition and feeling of worthwhile accomplishment and individual significance. If the employees seem dissatisfied with their work, their supervision, their co-workers, and/or the company in general, then one of the objectives of the company is not being met. With a well-planned training program each worker may better understand his place on the work team and the importance of other people on the team. Another objective may be to receive an adequate rate of return on investment. Analysis may reveal that the firm is not getting this adequate return. This is a danger sign for many things,

one of which may be inadequately trained personnel. The extent to which the firm is meeting its other objectives may also help to determine its training needs.

12. *Technological Advancement within the Industry.*—Those firms anticipating technological changes in materials or machinery need a training program if they are to keep pace with technological changes. For example, it is now predicted by Mr. Jay Oglesby of Southern Homes, Inc., Charleston, Illinois, that within ten years homes will be made predominately of materials other than wood. It is expected that only 3% of the total building material in the average home will be wood. Already this firm is making preparations to keep pace with the technological changes which are bringing about increased uses of plastics, wood fibers, and other synthetic materials in the home building industry. In addition they are now preparing their workers so that the workers will be qualified with the necessary skills and attitudes to cope with these technological changes. Firms which can foresee their technological changes should also foresee a need for training.

13. *Rate of Growth of the Firm.*—Periods of economic growth for a firm generally imply that there is also increased recruitment. In such cases the well-trained worker is more difficult to find. Thus, there is a much greater need at this time for training within industry. Firms should recognize that a period of growth for them is a danger signal for their training program. It is time for a general upgrading of their entire training program.

14. *Comparison with Other Firms.*—How does the firm rate in comparison with competitors? Is employment less stable than that of competitors? Is the Workmen's Compensation excessive? Does the firm have an excessive amount of waste, spoilage, and machine damage as compared with similar industries? Does the firm have a greater amount of waste time resulting from accidents and other work stoppages? Is the rate of production less than in similar industries? If an answer to any of these questions is "yes," determinations should be made as to why the firm is inferior in a given area. Proper training of employees may be an aid in bringing the firm up to a level held by similar and successful industries.

15. *Suggestions from Outside the Organization.*—A firm can receive considerable help from outside its own organization. Specialists in management problems may be employed to study the entire operations of a firm. These specialists will advise the firm as to what should be done for the betterment of the firm. The inauguration of a training program may be recommended as one means of improvement. The consulting firm brings with them a vast amount of knowledge and experience. Many managers do not have the necessary knowledge and/or experience to adequately appraise their own firm in terms of training needs. Thus, management consultants can provide an invaluable aid in helping to determine a firm's training needs.

While a given company will utilize that combination of the above tools that best suits its needs, two important considerations must be borne in mind. *First,*

the techniques must be used in an integrated manner. For example, appraisals by superiors are supplemented by appraisals by associates, test results are implemented by interviews, etc. Only in this way can a true determination of needs be derived. *Secondly*, evaluations must be made regularly enough that changes in performance can be noted before a long time span has elapsed.

Other Evidences of a Need for Training

In the foregoing, attention was directed to those sources of appraisal useful in determining individual training needs on a planned basis. However, little was said about those other factors which may be "signal" of a need for training. Some of these sources are:

1. High rate of employee turnover.
2. High accident rate.
3. Excess scrap and product rejections.
4. Poor leadership.
5. Inadequate communications.
6. Poor morale.
7. Slowness in decision-making.
8. Inadequate planning.
9. Policies misunderstood.
10. Low productivity.

While this list is by no means all-inclusive, it points out areas in which training *may be* deficient. Further it is evident that many factors other than training can influence these areas. Thus, training should not be regarded as the *sole* factor contributing to, or eliminating, problems in these areas. However, its benefits *should be considered* in an analysis of problems which might arise in any of the above areas.

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