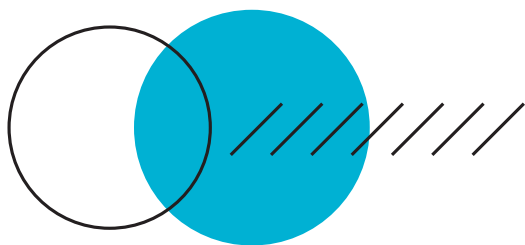
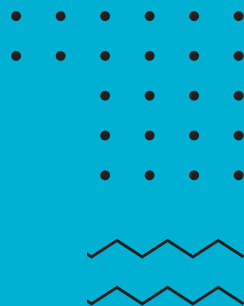




Needs Assessment on a Shoestring

Kelly L. Jones
Jody N. Lumsden



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ATD Press is an internationally renowned source of insightful and practical information on talent development, training, and professional development.

ATD Press

1640 King Street

Alexandria, VA 22314 USA

Ordering information: Books published by ATD Press can be purchased by visiting ATD's website at td.org/books or by calling 800.628.2783 or 703.683.8100.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023940473

ISBN-10: 1-95394-693-3

ISBN-13: 978-1-953946-93-5

e-ISBN: 978-1-95715-708-5

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Printed by BR Printers, San Jose, CA

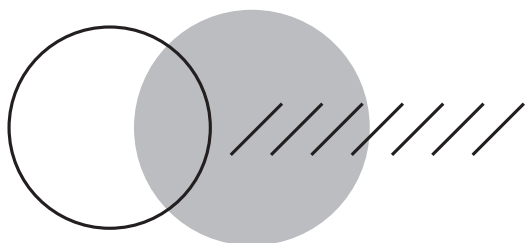
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ABOUT THE ON A SHOESTRING SERIES



ATD's On a Shoestring series helps professionals successfully execute core topics in training and talent development when facing limitations of time, money, staff, and other resources. This series was designed for practitioners who work as a department of one, for new or "accidental" trainers, instructional designers, and learning managers who need fast, inexpensive access to practical strategies that work, and for those who work for small organizations or in industries that have limited training and development resources. This book will help you whether you're new to needs assessments or have a lot of experience but now must conduct needs assessments with less time, support, and budget.



Dedication and Acknowledgments

We dedicate this book to each other. Jody has always enjoyed having Kelly as her supporter, sounding board, and learning theory guru. Kelly has always appreciated Jody's creativity, energy, and curiosity. Life got more exciting when our paths intersected and eventually led to this book. Here's to many more years of being learning friends and co-authors.

To Eliza Blanchard, former content manager and now operations manager for Talent Leader Consortiums, ATD: Thank you for giving us the opportunity to write this book!

To Jack Harlow, senior acquisition and development editor, ATD Press: Thank you for guiding us through drafting and editing. Your work made our work better, and we greatly appreciate your patience and insight.

Kelly would also like to thank the Unicorn Tribunal—Lani, Patty, Jen, and Cinnamon—for your never-ending support and all-around awesomeness. For the grad school angels—Jolly, Jennifer, Susie, and Bonnie—after 13 years, longitudinal data suggest y'all are delightful. For Noelle, there aren't enough words. I can't wait to watch you open a box of these books. For Joshua, you continue to be my favorite child. Thank you for always making me laugh.

Jody would also like to thank the non-book-club book club—Molly Ebel, Laura Russel, and Angie Rybacki—for unyielding support; work buddies Jamie Vanderhyden, Stephanie Hardy, and Naomi Pusch, who encourage me to dream big while getting the work done; and last but not least, Greg Lumsden, Winston, and Whitman who are my favorite people on the planet. The sweetest moments in my life have been shared with you.

Introduction

You can learn a lot about needs assessments through mystery stories. Sherlock Holmes leveraged observational skills and deductive reasoning to solve crimes. Velma Dinkley sought rational explanations for each conundrum she faced with the Scooby gang. Angus MacGyver employed ingenuity to defeat different problems using simple, readily available tools. Hercule Poirot relied on psychology and a knowledge of human tendencies to figure out every puzzle. These detectives didn't have large teams, unlimited budgets, or a bottomless well of resources to work with, but they succeeded by identifying *who*, *where*, and *how* to solve the problems that no one else could solve. ("It was Professor Plum, in the library, with the candlestick!")

Talent development practitioners have many job titles and serve many capacities. We wear many hats, including instructional designer, content developer, e-learning specialist, trainer, facilitator, teacher, coach, learning manager, project manager, performance improvement specialist, researcher, analyst, problem solver, and change agent. To conduct an effective needs assessment, you'll add one more role to your professional repertoire, and for that, you need a detective hat.

There are many parallels between a detective's role in leading an investigation and your role in leading a needs assessment. Detectives don't have answers when they start a case, and it's important for them not to jump to conclusions. Through the process of investigation, they ask questions, conduct interviews, make observations, collect evidence, evaluate findings, and eventually solve the case. When you conduct a needs assessment, you'll follow a strategic analysis process to uncover real problems, root causes, and viable solutions.

There's not one right way to conduct a needs assessment, but conducting one is always the right way to begin a training, organization development, or change management project. Ultimately, your job is to provide analysis and

solutions, and you can't do that without understanding employees, the contexts in which they work, the organization and its goals, and the real problems that need to be addressed. During a needs assessment, you'll investigate and uncover everything you can about the key problem to be solved—without immediately jumping to solutions. To solve a business need, think like a detective.

Conducting a Needs Assessment— Even on a Shoestring

No matter what talent development problem you're tackling, we have one piece of advice for you: Always start with a needs assessment.

This book will help you build, borrow, and buy your way through a successful needs assessment. The work may feel intimidating, overwhelming, or impossible, especially if you're part of a small team or operating as a department of one. You may be new to the process and unsure of how to begin. You may face expectations from stakeholders who don't understand the importance of needs assessments, demand training when training may not be the right solution, or expect deliverables with accelerated deadlines. You may think that needs assessments make sense in theory, but in practice, completing one requires more time and resources than you have available.

If you struggle in any of these ways, this is the book for you. Regardless of the scope of the project, the constraints of the business problem, or how you get the job done, the steps associated with needs assessments are flexible enough to scale up or down. In other words, you don't need months, thousands of dollars, or a large staff to conduct an effective needs assessment. Needs assessments can be complex and challenging, but with a good strategy, the work can be broken down into manageable pieces, and many tasks can be completed simultaneously or iteratively. You can save time, effort, and costs without cutting corners on quality.

We have each been a "department of one" with limited resources, and we understand the challenges of meeting expectations and delivering results while operating on a shoestring budget. We wrote this book so that you can learn how to conduct a needs assessment with confidence and efficiency—two of the best things you can have when you're operating with limited resources.

Jody has worked as a graduate teaching assistant, graphic designer, instructor, learning designer, media developer, digital instructional designer, and

learning technology consultant. She now works as a senior consultant, guiding organizations through large-scale change management strategies and work-force upskilling efforts. Kelly has worked as a learning technology specialist, instructional designer, curriculum developer, instructor, consultant, and leader for higher education, nonprofit, and corporate organizations. She's currently the director of learning and development for a rapidly growing startup, leading efforts to educate and empower thousands of employees in almost 200 locations across the country.

In each of our professional roles, we've conducted various types of needs assessments and encountered challenges and failures when solutions were implemented without one. We advocate for needs assessments because we learned their value the hard way. Through trial and error, diverse experiences, challenges, and successes, we've developed practical strategies for designing and conducting needs assessments in a reasonable amount of time, without a lot of help, and with small budgets. Our goal is to give you the strategies you need to efficiently identify needs, collect and analyze data, and make informed recommendations.

Work Backward: Needs Assessment Overview

What is a needs assessment? A needs assessment is a contextual, investigative process of identifying and addressing gaps between a current state and a goal state. When you conduct a needs assessment, you begin by determining the end goal and then identifying what is needed to reach that goal. The *gaps* you identify are the *needs*—the things that must change so that an organization can reach its goal. This process includes analyzing the current state and the goal state within the context of the organization and identifying the gaps, root causes, challenges, opportunities, roadblocks, and solutions that must be addressed to solve problems.

It Doesn't Always End With Training

A needs assessment should be intentionally broad in scope. A training needs assessment can be part of a broader needs assessment but should not be the initial focus—the right solution may or may not be training. If the need is identified as a gap in skills, behaviors, or knowledge, then it makes sense to expand the project to include a training-specific needs assessment. Other

needs require different solutions such as new processes, organizational practices, resource allocation, or change management initiatives. Training is not always the answer.

Training is expensive—it costs time and money to build, deliver, evaluate, and maintain training programs, and employees’ time away from work is expensive as well. According to ATD’s *2022 State of the Industry*, the direct learning expenditure per employee was \$1,280 in 2021. By ensuring that training is only leveraged as a solution when the need is a knowledge or skills gap, and that when training solutions are built, they are effective, talent development professionals can make positive contributions to their organization’s bottom line and build trusted partnerships with organizational leaders.

It’s important to recognize the risk of not doing a needs assessment. Training can be misunderstood as a miracle cure that will fix all performance issues, productivity challenges, communication gaps, and more. Training can also be minimized as a check-the-box step and be overlooked in new technology rollouts, process improvements, and other change initiatives.

If business needs are not correctly identified, you can end up with scope creep, multiple rounds of revisions, lack of performance metrics, ineffective solutions, unrealized return on investment (ROI), frustrated learners, and leaders who question the value of training initiatives. If the gaps you identify are knowledge or skill needs, then a training needs assessment is the first step of the instructional design work required to address the training need. Training isn’t a magic bullet, but when it’s done right and addresses real needs, it can be a significant contributor to organizational success.



DEEPER DIVE

Instructional Design on a Shoestring

Want to learn more about designing effective training and learning solutions? Check out *Instructional Design on a Shoestring* by Brian Washburn.

The Purpose of Needs Assessments

A needs assessment focuses on real business problems and answers the question: “What needs to change?” If you need to change behavior, increase

knowledge or conceptual understanding, shift organizational culture or practices, improve processes, allocate resources, or enhance performance, you must understand both the current state *and* the goal state to accurately identify the problem, root cause, and needs. Almost all training, process, resource, and organizational goals can be analyzed in terms of change and addressed through an effective needs assessment, but you must start broad and work backward to identify which solutions will best address the true needs.

Why Work Backward?

To solve the right problem, you must have a clear picture of the end goal and then identify what is needed to reach that goal within the context of the organization's present reality. By starting with the end goal and working backward, an effective needs assessment allows you to make a real impact while saving time, effort, and money.

Working backward—analyzing the gaps between the ideal future state and the current state—allows you to understand the big picture, including business goals, needs, root causes, priorities, resources, and constraints. This big picture perspective will allow you to:

- Set realistic expectations with your stakeholders, clients, leaders, participants, team, and the employees you serve.
- Accurately identify needs.
- Design solutions that will meet those needs.
- Plan the metrics for measuring the success of solutions.

To conduct an effective needs assessment, you must have the right contextual understanding, ask the right questions, observe the right things, gather accurate data, analyze data effectively, and build actionable recommendations. It can be tough to identify needs, especially when you're sorting through conflicting opinions, asked to be reactive instead of proactive, pressured by the urgent needs and demands of other departments and company leaders, and trying to demonstrate the ROI of your work.

The strategies in this book will help you accurately identify needs, collect and analyze data, and align recommendations with strategic goals so that you can solve the right problems and bring value to your organizations through efficient, cost-effective, time-saving solutions.

Build, Borrow, or Buy: How to Use This Book

This book offers guidance and strategies to support talent development professionals in identifying and addressing organizational needs. It's a field guide designed for savvy practitioners who may not have enough time or resources available but want to conduct high-quality needs assessments. This book will also be helpful for graduate students, talent development teams who want to design their own professional development paths through a shared book study, or a book club discussion for professional association chapter members or communities of practice. This book is designed to help you find the information, strategies, and resources you need as quickly and easily as possible. It's organized into three parts:

- **Build.** Part 1 provides a comprehensive overview of needs assessments methodology and describes processes and strategies you can use even when facing time and resource constraints. You'll learn how to build a needs assessment strategy (chapter 1), build insight through data collection (chapter 2) and analysis (chapter 3), and build effective solution recommendations (chapter 4). For most needs assessments, especially when you're working on a shoestring, you'll likely build more than you'll borrow or buy, so this part of the book is the longest.
- **Borrow.** Part 2 provides solutions for borrowing existing information, talent, and resources. You'll learn how to identify and use relevant data that already exists within your organization (chapter 5), and how to best leverage the time, talent, and perspectives of your subject matter experts and stakeholders (chapter 6).
- **Buy.** Part 3 provides resource management strategies for conducting needs assessments, including ways to gain buy-in from leadership and stakeholders. You'll learn ways to budget the time needed to conduct a needs assessment and strategies for managing your time effectively (chapter 7). You'll also find suggestions for free or cost-effective tools and resources that are worth spending money on (chapter 8), along with strategies for advocating for more time and resources when needed (chapter 9).

Recurring Elements

Throughout this book, you'll see icons marking four recurring elements:



Time Saver: This is a strategy for shaving time off a best practice.



On the Cheap: These are free or low-cost ideas and tools or suggestions for how to get funding.



Deeper Dive: These callouts say something like, "Did this whet your appetite? Here's a resource to deepen your knowledge."



Tool: This is a job aid, tool, or checklist to help you put ideas into action. You'll find them throughout the text and complete versions in appendix A.

In addition to the tools, in chapter 1 we introduce you to a needs assessment case study based on a customer service scenario. In appendix B, you'll find the complete worked example for this scenario. This worked example will walk you through the team's journey from start to finish, and you'll see samples of their strategy plan, data collection and analysis methods, findings, conclusions, recommendations, and results report.

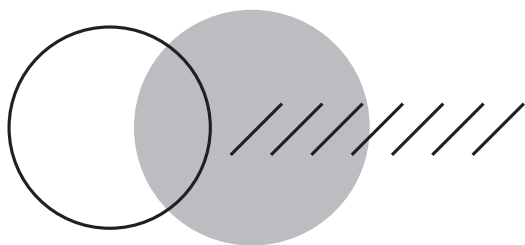
PART 1

BUILD

When you're operating on a shoestring, you'll most likely build more than you borrow and borrow more than you buy. Part 1 of this book provides a comprehensive overview of needs assessment methodology. The following chapters include many suggestions, tools, and examples to help you understand the big-picture view of the needs assessment strategy so you can invest your time wisely, work backward to start with the end goal, and build the strategy you need to get there as quickly and easily as possible.

In this part of the book, you'll learn how to build:

- A needs assessment strategy
- Insight through data collection and analysis
- Recommendations based on your findings and conclusions to effectively share the results of a needs assessment



1

Building the Strategy

What do a detective and a needs assessment practitioner have in common? They're both under pressure to solve problems quickly and thoroughly, often with limited resources and in challenging situations. They both need insight and a strong strategy to leverage the best research tactics. And if you're a gumshoe operating on a shoestring, you need techniques that will save you time, effort, and money while still getting the job done right.

A needs assessment is a contextual, investigative process of identifying and addressing gaps (or needs) between a current state and a goal state. The purpose of a needs assessment is to answer the question: "What needs to change?" Conducting a needs assessment is the best way to set yourself and your stakeholders up for success *before* you invest in designing training, workshops, programs, or other organizational initiatives.

Data-driven needs assessments are critical for organizational success. As the Indeed.com Editorial Team (2019) explains, "A needs assessment removes uncertainty by exploring the company's specific needs and the actions it can take to attain them." Start with a needs assessment to ensure that you've identified the right problem and have the right data to address it. Organizational challenges that can benefit from an effective needs assessment include:

- Training requests
- New technology or process rollouts
- New products or product updates
- Declining employee performance or revised performance standards
- Increasing employee turnover rates
- Modified budget allocations
- Low customer satisfaction rates

- Loss of profitability or productivity
- New laws, regulations, or compliance requirements

Needs assessments can help provide strategic focus during volatility, reduce uncertainty, create clarity from ambiguity, and solve complex problems. This chapter will walk you through the entire needs assessment process, give you tools you can begin using immediately, and help you identify each step of building a successful needs assessment strategy.



ON THE CHEAP

Needs Assessment Professional Community

Jody and Kelly are active members of ATD (the Association for Talent Development) and AEA (the American Evaluation Association). You can purchase membership to either organization (at td.org or eval.org) to gain access to resources that will help you conduct needs assessments. Each organization also publishes a blog that you can access for free:

- ATD Blog: td.org/insights
- AEA365 Blog: aea365.org/blog

You can also learn more about the AEA Needs Assessment Topic Interest Group at comm.eval.org/needsassessment/home to connect with other practitioners who are tackling the work of conducting needs assessments on a shoestring.

Be Sure You're Solving the Right Problem

Many training projects and other organizational initiatives begin with a manager requesting an immediate solution that they believe will solve an urgent problem. However, the problem is often more complex than they realize, caused by something they haven't accounted for, or requires a different solution than originally imagined. Consider this customer service scenario:

Over the last year, the turnover rate for customer service employees has increased by 7 percent. High employee turnover is causing serious performance problems. When the customer service director learns that the customer satisfaction rate has fallen to 68 percent, he contacts the functional training team and insists they start work right

away on a new onboarding training course. He believes new employees' lack of knowledge is driving the performance declines.

The functional training team's instructional designer pauses her current projects to meet this urgent need. She interviews the customer support director to determine key skills for new hires, revises the current onboarding materials, and spends three weeks developing a new, interactive, mobile-friendly e-learning course.

For the next six months, all new customer service employees complete the course during their first few days on the job, but performance metrics don't improve and the turnover rate continues to rise. The customer service director now blames the instructional designer—he believes the new onboarding course isn't effective.

The instructional designer feels defeated. Learner satisfaction scores in the course are high, the content is engaging, and the course functionality works well. She's not sure what went wrong. She didn't know that employee turnover had been a critical issue for the last two years, and that the director had already tried a financial intervention—merit increases, key performance indicator (KPI) incentives, and signing bonuses—with no resulting improvements in retention. If she had known, she would have approached his training request very differently. This situation calls for a needs assessment.

**TOOL****Needs Assessment Case Study**

In appendix B, you'll find a worked example of a needs assessment case study based on this customer service scenario. The worked example will walk you through the team's journey from start to finish, and you'll see samples of their strategy plan, data collection and analysis methods, findings, conclusions, recommendations, and results report. The details and explanations provided in this example will help you connect the concepts presented in this book to a realistic needs assessment project conducted by a team of one.

Talent development teams receive many urgent requests for training, and urgency can often overshadow the true cause of performance problems. Many talent development professionals go into this field of work because they want to help others succeed. Because they are often departments of one or few, tasked with managing all training and professional development efforts on a shoestring budget, they try to meet requests quickly to add value to their organization. To truly make a positive impact, however, you must identify the real need at the heart of the issue you're being asked to address *before* delivering a solution. To do that, work backward to build a strong needs assessment strategy.

The Needs Assessment Process

The needs assessment process is both an art and a science. With experience, you will refine your own needs assessment methodology and adjust as needed to serve the project you're working on. In general, though, the needs assessment process has three parts: building the strategy, building the case, and building the recommendations.

First, build your needs assessment process strategy—this is your investigation plan. Think of your strategy as the iconic magnifying glass; it's the way you'll unravel the complex mystery of business needs. Building your strategy is the discovery work of identifying the key problem, current state, goal state, gaps (needs) between those states, key stakeholders, research questions, and the success metrics needed to evaluate solutions.

Once your strategy is in place, you'll build your case through data collection and analysis. Building your case is the work of critical, creative thinking that leads to actionable insights. Once your data case is established, you'll build recommendations based on the results of your analysis. Building recommendations is the work of leveraging your results, demonstrating value to your stakeholders, and empowering your organization to act on the results of your needs assessment. This chapter will walk you through building your needs assessment process strategy. Chapters 2 and 3 will take you through building your case by collecting and analyzing data. Chapter 4 will guide you through the process of building recommendations based on your data analysis and sharing the results of the needs assessment.

A great way to start is by envisioning the results of your needs assessment so that you can account for and manage expectations and focus on the right

things. The questions in the Future Debrief time saver are a great resource for working backward and starting strong.



TIME SAVER

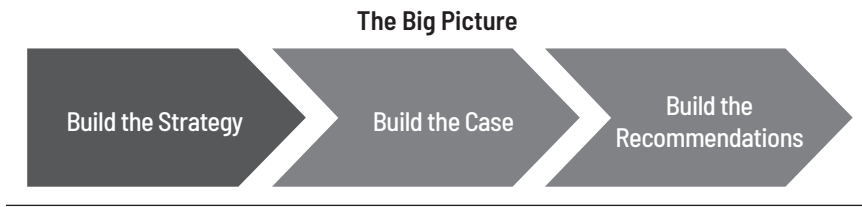
Future Debrief

Before launching a needs assessment, it can be helpful to envision the *results* of the project. Pretend that you are debriefing your CEO on the results of the needs assessment and summarizing your key findings and recommended solutions. The following questions create a framework for planning your needs assessment strategy. Consider the data you will need to collect, the people you will need to include, and the insight you will need to gain to answer these questions at the end of the needs assessment:

- What was the key problem?
- How did you know this was the right problem to solve?
- What was the current state of this problem?
- What was the goal state of this problem?
- Which stakeholders participated in this needs assessment?
- What data did you collect and analyze to assess needs and build recommendations?
- What solutions did you recommend, and why?
- What resources are needed to implement those solutions?
- If implemented, how will the solutions be evaluated?
- What value did this needs assessment provide to your organization?

A Strategic Approach

Before you solve an organizational problem, you must verify that you've identified the *right* problem. It sounds obvious, but this first step will make or break your needs assessment and it's easy to overlook key considerations. After all, you don't yet know what you don't yet know. Strategically planning your needs assessment approach, in collaboration with your stakeholders, is the best way to gain the insights needed for meaningful, measurable results (Figure 1-1).

Figure 1-1. Needs Assessment Methodology: Build the Strategy

For example, Jody worked on a project that focused on the localization of an enterprise-backed training program. Prior to doing the work, she considered what she needed, when it was due, and how she could get the work done. She decided that during the limited project timeframe, she wanted to understand the local employees' needs. This was the highest value work because it helped with implementation, communication strategies, and company knowledge. She identified the best opportunity through strategy planning.

Kelly conducted a needs assessment for an industry-specific leadership development program and wanted to conduct multiple focus groups with dozens of potential program participants and participating companies' CEOs. The project timeline absolutely did not allow for that work. Instead, she opted for interviews with 10 members of the client's board of directors. Not only did that approach save valuable time, but it also helped gain buy-in from board members who would later support and promote the program. Kelly's strategic plan for this project helped her focus on the most important information she needed to collect (industry leaders' perspectives) and identify resources for data collection (members of the board of directors).

10 Needs Assessment Strategy Components

Building a strong strategy is especially important when you are operating on a shoestring. You don't want to waste time, money, or resources, so start by building a strategy plan that will help you focus on the work that brings the most value to your project.

The top 10 components of your needs assessment strategy are:

1. The primary problem to be solved
2. The business impact of the problem
3. The current state and goal state of the problem, and known gaps

4. The stakeholders
5. The research methodology (research questions, data collection, and analysis plan)
6. The project scope (expectations, timeline, budget, and available resources)
7. Plans for sharing the results of the needs assessment
8. Constraints (limitations and delimitations)
9. Success measures to evaluate recommendations
10. Value measures for the needs assessment

If you're thinking, "Wait! I'm a team of one and working without a budget! How am I supposed to build a strategy with 10 parts?" Hang tight. These components are important, but you can build a solid plan with less. Table 1-1 shows a shoestring version of our top 10 list.

Table 1-1. Categorizing the 10 Components of a Needs Assessment Strategy

Must Have	• The primary problem to be solved • The business impact of the problem • The current state and goal state of the problem, and known gaps • The stakeholders • The research methodology (research questions, data collection, and analysis plan)
Should Have	• The project scope (expectations, timeline, budget, and available resources) • Plans for sharing the results of the needs assessment
Nice to Have	• Constraints (limitations and delimitations) • Success measures to evaluate recommendations • Value measures for the needs assessment

We'll discuss each of these components in order of importance and share pointers to help you plan your needs assessment strategy on a shoestring.

In addition, we've included a summary at the beginning of each component section designed to help you determine the value of that component for your project. You can skip or revisit these sections as needed to design strategy plans for different types of needs assessment projects. To save you time, effort, and frustration, we also created worksheets to help you build your needs assessment strategy (appendix A) and a worked example of how to use them (appendix B).

- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** A quick summary of why you should consider including this component
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** Reasonable considerations for when this component may not be required for your project
 - ▶ **What's the minimal viable product (MVP)?** The realistic requirements for completing your project with usable results
-



TOOL

Needs Assessment Strategy Worksheet

In appendix A, you'll find a worksheet you can adopt or adapt for your own needs assessment projects. It captures all the elements covered in this chapter from problem statement to after-action review and lessons learned.

Now let's dive into the components, starting with the most important: identifying the real problem that needs to be solved.

Identifying the Problem

- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** The problem is the reason for the needs assessment; it is the issue, challenge, or opportunity to be solved. If you don't know the real problem, you can't assess needs.
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** Never. You can't build a strategy until you identify the real problem. A perfectly executed needs assessment that solves the wrong problem doesn't help anyone and will end up costing you time, effort, money, relationship capital, and credibility.
 - ▶ **What's the MVP?** It will include clear descriptions of:
 - The key problem to be solved
 - The business impact of the problem
 - The current state of the problem
 - The goal state
 - The gaps between the current state and the goal state
-

Needs assessment projects may come to you in several ways. You may be directly assigned a needs assessment by your manager or by a leader at your organization. You may need to conduct a needs assessment in response to a training request. You may have a client who hires you to conduct a needs assessment, or a client who doesn't realize that they need a needs assessment. In any case, the first step is to capture the reason for the needs assessment.

The heart of a needs assessment is identifying the key problem to be solved, the business impact of the problem, the current state, the goal state, and the gaps that exist between the current and goal states. Aim for quantifiable, measurable descriptions of each element; specificity will set the parameters of the needs assessment and provide metrics needed to evaluate the business impact and the feasibility of recommendations. You might be wondering what each of these terms means and why they are essential to address at the beginning of a needs assessment. Let's define our terms.

Problem

A problem is a business need. The problem is the reason for the needs assessment; it is the issue, challenge, or opportunity to be solved. You'll most likely hear the problem expressed in need statements:

- "We need training! Our employees don't know how to use our systems."
- "We need to hire more employees. The workload is too much for our staff."
- "We need to improve the accounts payable process. We're falling behind on payments."
- "We need better software. This system just doesn't work."

Identifying the problem can be challenging. It's human nature to jump to solutions as soon as we see a problem—notice that each of the examples actually expresses needs in terms of solutions. Also, notice that none of these problem statements include metrics; they aren't yet quantifiable. You'll need to work with stakeholders to identify and quantify the problem as early as possible to plan an effective needs assessment.

During the intake discussion (the first conversation you have with a sponsor about a needs assessment project), make sure to ask two critical questions:

1. When did this problem start?
2. What has already been tried to solve it?

A needs assessment should focus on only one problem at a time. Today's workplace challenges are complex, and complex problems require in-depth assessment. Key problems usually affect profitability, productivity, strategic goals, employee retention, and organizational performance. If you identify multiple key problems, you will need to work with senior leaders and stakeholders to prioritize needs assessment projects to address each one.

Current State

The current state of the problem is a measurable description of reality as it is today. You can start to identify the current state by listening to stakeholders' rationale of needs. In the previous examples, the follow-up statements—the stakeholder's expression of *why* the solution is needed—are possible indications of the current state:

- “Our employees don’t know how to use our systems.”
- “The workload is too much for our staff.”
- “We’re falling behind on payments.”
- “This system just doesn’t work.”

Just like with the problem, you will work with stakeholders to identify and quantify the current state and validate with data. Sometimes, conducting a needs assessment requires you to collect and analyze data about the current state *before* you can accurately determine needs.

Goal State

The goal state is the desired outcome of change—the future results of solving today's problem. Just like the problem and current state, it's important to quantify the goal state so that recommendations can be made and metrics can be identified to evaluate solutions. A goal state like “improve employee retention” isn't quantifiable, so stakeholders may have different expectations of the needs assessment and recommended solutions. A goal statement like “increase employee retention by 15 percent over the next six months and maintain a retention rate of 85 percent or greater” is measurable, and the quantifiable outcomes can be used to determine project priority, value measures for the needs assessment, and solutions evaluation. Notice, however, that the goal “increase employee retention by 15 percent over the next six

months” requires you to identify the current employee retention rate. You can’t measure improvement without a current baseline.

Known Gaps

Gaps are the differences between the current state and the goal state. Identify a gap, and you’ve identified a business need. Gaps (needs) emerge during a needs assessment, and some gaps are known or can be identified and measured as soon as the problem, current state, and future state are identified and quantified.

Business Impact

The business impact tells us why this problem is worth solving, how the problem is affecting the organization’s performance, and how urgently the problem needs to be solved. If the business impact is high, the problem’s priority should also be high.

Crafting the Problem Statement

It can be helpful to draft several versions of the problem statement and refine it as you define the current state, goal state, known gaps, and business impact. Be as precise and concise as possible.

Clearly defining the problem, current state, goal state, and business impact is more difficult than it sounds. When trying to accurately describe the current state, for example, you may face a lack of current data or documentation, limited access to interviews and observations, lack of access to or limited time with subject matter experts, or employees who are reluctant to complain or tell you about skill or knowledge gaps. Or, when attempting to define the goal state, you may face unrealistic expectations, budget constraints, workforce gaps, technology and system challenges, or deadlines that are either too soon or set too far in the future.

Your job in these conversations is to ask questions; learn the landscape of the problem; holistically understand the current state, goal state, and business impact; collect data to verify the problem’s current state and business impact; and help leaders identify measurable objectives for the goal state. Stakeholders may disagree about the problem and the business impact. By asking a lot of questions, you can compare stakeholders’ responses and then

compare their responses against the data you collect to validate the problem, current state, and business impact.



TIME SAVER

Cut to the Chase and Ask Five Whys

Prepare yourself with “cut to the chase” questions to make the most of limited time with leaders, subject matter experts, and stakeholders. These shortcut questions can be a great starting place for quickly getting to the heart of a business problem. By asking different stakeholders and subject matter experts the same questions, you can compare their responses and identify differences that may point to unaligned goals, overlooked perspectives, and organization gaps.

Cut-to-the-chase questions include:

- What is the most important thing that needs to change?
- What is currently driving the need for this change?
- What will happen if we don't solve this problem?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what is the *one* thing you would do to solve this problem?
- How will you know if this problem is solved?

The five whys method, developed from the Toyota production system, is a quick way to guide stakeholders through the process of identifying a needs assessment problem. The process is straightforward: Ask *why* five times, or repeatedly until the question can no longer be answered. This process will eventually lead to the identification of the key business problem that can be addressed through a needs assessment. You can start with a trigger question to get started like “*Why* is this a problem?”

Identifying Stakeholders

- **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** Stakeholders are the people who need to solve the key problem, are responsible for solving the problem, or have a vested interest in the problem (and therefore have a vested interest in the needs assessment).

- ▶ **When can you skip it?** Never. If no one has a stake in the key problem, then there is no reason to conduct a needs assessment. You need support, input, insight, and aligned expectations with the right stakeholders.
- ▶ **What's the MVP?** It will include a list of key stakeholders. Ideally, one of these stakeholders will be a project sponsor—a leader who can help guide the scope and ensure the completion of the needs assessment.

Stakeholders are people within an organization who are interested in the needs assessment, will be affected by the results of the needs assessment, are responsible for the problem being solved, or may benefit from solutions. In other words, stakeholders have a vested interest in the needs assessment. The larger the problem, the more stakeholders you're likely to have.

When in doubt about stakeholders, start by asking, "Who is responsible for this process, department, system, policy, or result?" Corporate shareholders, for example, are invested in a business's financial success; needs assessment stakeholders are invested in (and often responsible for) solving a business need. You'll learn more about working with stakeholders in chapter 6.

Different stakeholders have different levels of investment in a needs assessment. We like to start by listing all the project stakeholders and categorizing them as a sponsor, key stakeholder, advisor, collaborator, or partner:

- **Sponsor.** Needs assessment projects usually have a sponsor—a primary stakeholder who leads or is responsible for the business function's role in the needs assessment. Often, the sponsor is the person who requested the needs assessment, but they may also be assigned by a more senior leader. The sponsor usually shares responsibility with the needs assessment practitioner for completing the project and provides final approval. Sponsors may have the authority to implement recommendations.
- **Champion.** A champion is a leader with the insight, influence, authority, and interest required to guide the goals of your needs assessment, secure resources, and support recommended solutions. Champions can provide support at a higher leadership level than what you may be able to do on your own. If your needs assessment project doesn't have a clear champion, ask yourself who will care most about the outcome. Who is the driver of the business need at stake? If that

leader buys into the needs assessment, and you're able to communicate the value of the work to them, you will be able to enlist their support when you're facing challenges or it's time to share the results of the needs assessment with other leaders and stakeholders.

- **Key stakeholders.** For a needs assessment, key stakeholders include additional leaders who are responsible for or affected by aspects of the problem and subject matter experts who can contribute to understanding the problem and potential solutions.
- **Advisors.** Advisors are people inside and sometimes outside your organization who can help you by offering counsel on the problem, the needs assessment strategy, or potential solutions. Advisors will have skills and knowledge to provide technical guidance. Needs assessment advisors may be members of the business line you are supporting, training professionals, or leadership mentors.
- **Collaborators.** Collaborators are people who can assist you in doing the work of a needs assessment, such as collecting and analyzing data. Look for possible collaborators on your team, in other training areas, or in specialized roles such as data analysts or human resources business partners.
- **Partners.** Partners are people in your organization who have insight that will help you complete your project. Partners don't usually take an active role in the needs assessment, but they can help steer you in the right direction when you're not sure where to look for the information you need.

Once you've identified your stakeholders, work with them to determine the scope, expectations, and resources available for the needs assessment as you clarify the key questions that need to be addressed and the data that you'll need to answer those questions. Before you can clearly determine the needs assessment project scope and expectations, you must determine your research questions. It's time to grab your detective hat!

Identifying the Methodology: Start With Research Questions

- **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** Your research questions will determine the strategies you need to collect and analyze data and set the scope for the needs assessment.

- ▶ **When can you skip it?** Never. Conducting a needs assessment without specific research questions is like going grocery shopping without a list. You might gather the wrong things or skip the things you need most.
- ▶ **What's the MVP?** It will include a clear question, or several questions, about the key problem that you can solve by collecting and analyzing data.

Once you've identified the problem, current state, goal state, and business impact, you can develop research questions to guide your data collection and data analysis processes. You can start by writing a working draft of research questions, but be sure to review them with your key stakeholders before you begin collecting data. Your stakeholders may be able to clarify, correct, or enhance your research questions. Align with stakeholders on the research questions to ensure your data collection process is as effective as possible.



TIME SAVER

Making Research Questions Relevant

Here are a few notes to help jumpstart your process:

- Good research questions can't be answered with a simple yes or no—instead, they provide depth and breadth for the needs assessment topic.
- Focus on the information stakeholders need to make informed decisions—don't include “nice to know” questions that aren't directly related to the problem you're trying to assess.
- To evaluate the relevance of a potential research question, ask your stakeholders, “What could you do if you had the answer to this question?”
- If you're new to writing research questions, feel stuck, or don't have enough information about the business problem, start by asking your stakeholders the top three things they'd like to know about the problem you are investigating.

If your shoestring is incredibly short, frayed at the edges, or barely hanging on, start with the two most basic research questions:

- What is causing this problem?
- What needs to change to solve this problem?

Your research questions set the scope for your needs assessment. Often, you may develop a primary research question with a few supporting subquestions. This allows for large investigations to be broken down into smaller segments. Asking clear questions will help you identify data sources and ensure that you have the right information to complete the needs assessment.

Your research questions kickstart your needs assessment methodology—to answer them, you must determine what data you need to collect and analyze. You can add, modify, or remove research questions as needed when you begin collecting data and learn more about the key problem you are trying to solve. You'll learn more about data collection and analysis in chapters 2 and 3.

Identifying the Project Scope

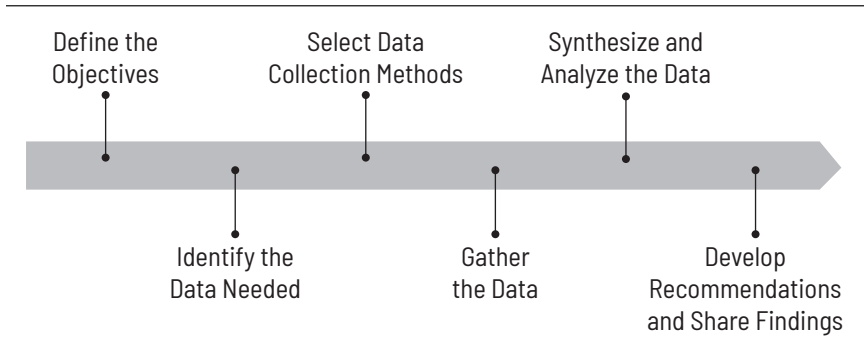
- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** The project scope defines expectations for requirements, results, deadlines, budgets, and resources. Without clear expectations, you may quickly experience scope creep.
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** Small needs assessments or those addressing problems with minor-to-medium business impact may not require a detailed project scope. If you're conducting a needs assessment for a single team or a single process, you can stay on track through informal alignment with stakeholders on goals and expectations.
 - ▶ **What's the MVP?** The MVP will include an agreement with stakeholders on what the needs assessment will and won't include, how and when it will be completed, and what resources are available.
-

As you plan and conduct a needs assessment, you'll wear many hats—including a detective hat, consultant hat, analyst hat, and project manager hat. Sometimes, managing the project can be just as challenging as collecting and analyzing the data. One of the most important steps for managing your time, resources, and stakeholders' expectations is to clearly determine the needs assessment project scope as early as possible.

To understand project scope, it's helpful to identify the high-level milestones. The major milestones for a needs assessment are universal, but the timeline is usually determined by the project's scope and available resources, including support staff, data sources, data collection and analysis tools, access

to participants if needed, and budget. The milestones in Figure 1-2 can be used to track significant points in the project.

Figure 1-2. Needs Assessment Project Scope: Milestones



You don't need a formalized project management system to conduct a needs assessment, but you do want to align with your team, leaders, and stakeholders on the project expectations, deadline, and budget. Defining the project scope is the best way to avoid *scope creep*—delays, increased costs, and inefficiencies caused by adding requirements, expectations, or additional problems to a needs assessment project once it's started. In short, determine what's in scope for the needs assessment—what problem will you research, and what findings, conclusions, and recommendations are required for the project to deliver expected results?

Scope creep is a needs assessment's mortal enemy—nothing can kill your project faster. Early in her career, Kelly was assigned a needs assessment project to determine why faculty members were reluctant to use a university's learning management system (LMS). That project quickly derailed into a series of wish lists and demands so large that the only solution seemed to be adopting a new LMS, which would have cost more than six figures and taken months to implement. Luckily, the project had a strong sponsor who was able to refocus the scope and advise Kelly to ask different questions. Kelly went back to each faculty member and asked, "How is using the LMS different from your usual classroom teaching, and what concerns does this cause?" That approach shifted the focus from the LMS's features and got to the heart of the instructors' real concerns—they weren't using the LMS because they believed their

syllabi, course content, and instructional materials would become the intellectual property of the university, could be seen and judged by their peers, or be “borrowed” and used by other instructors. Kelly was then able to provide that insight to the academic leaders who in turn developed a faculty intellectual property policy, addressed instructors’ concerns, and required access and security settings in the LMS. Faculty usage doubled within a semester and grew steadily after that.

Identifying Strategies for Sharing Results and Recommendations

- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** A needs assessment ends with key findings about the problem, and usually, recommendations for solving the problem. You need to know what stakeholders expect to see as the result of conducting a needs assessment—what are the key deliverables?
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** Needs assessment projects that are small, informal, or internal (projects done by your team for your team), or those addressing problems with minor-to-medium business impact, may not require a full results report. However, you will need to share results with key stakeholders.
 - ▶ **What’s the MVP?** It will include alignment with your stakeholders on their expectations for the delivery of the needs assessment results (and recommendations, if applicable), including what will be shared, how results will be shared, and who results will be shared with. An MVP can be as simple as sending them an email with your key findings and recommendations.
-

There isn’t one right way to share results and recommendations, but it’s important to plan a strategy for doing so. Sharing the results of a needs assessment gives you the opportunity to make your organization aware of problems, relevant explanations, causes, implications, and solutions. A common share strategy is delivering a results report or presentation, often via multiple versions for specific audiences. In our experience, the executive summary of the results report is the most valuable medium for sharing results. (See chapter 4 for more details and an example.) Work with your stakeholders to develop a communication plan so you can meet expectations for effectively sharing the results of your needs assessment.

When building your needs assessment strategy, ensure you understand all the audiences for the results and recommendations so you can identify the best strategies for keeping them informed and engaged. Remember that different audiences have different needs and different sensitivities related to the needs assessment problem, business impact, current state, goal state, and recommended solutions. Consider the various points in time when it will be helpful to inform audiences of project milestone statuses. We recommend discussing communication expectations with your stakeholders early on so that you'll know the best ways to share the results of the needs assessment for your specific audience.

Identifying Constraints: Limitations and Delimitations

- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** Constraints provide boundaries for your needs assessment project, and clearly defined boundaries will help you determine what's in and out of scope and what options for data collection and analysis are feasible.
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** Small projects, or those addressing a problem with minor-to-medium business impact, may not require you to detail or document constraints, but it's always helpful to define them for yourself, even if just informally for your own understanding of the project.
 - ▶ **What's the MVP?** It will include the project deadline or timeframe expectations and list of available data sources (who you can include in interviews, surveys, or observations and what documents you can access). Also, outline what is realistic with the data collection strategy you select (which you'll learn more about in chapter 2).
-

As you plan your needs assessment strategy, you'll need to identify the project constraints—limitations and delimitations. *Limitations* are things you cannot control, such as budget, timeline (if the deadline is set by someone else), location of employees, lack of resources, and project scope determined by leadership. *Delimitations* are limitations you choose to impose on a needs assessment to prevent scope creep, manage expectations, and meet deadlines. For example, if your budget is a limitation, and you don't have enough resources to conduct multiple focus groups, you may have to choose electronic questionnaires as a data collection delimitation.

Clearly defining limitations and delimitations also helps prevent scope creep. Remember the customer service scenario? They were facing many problems in addition to employee retention. You can try to collect data related to other problems during the needs assessment, but focusing on the key problem will help you focus the needs assessment on the primary purpose. (*Remember: One problem at a time!*)

Research projects always seem to draw attention from others. In Jody’s experience, she has noticed that research and data sparks interest and curiosity in many people—which can be a great thing. People will ask, “Did you consider [fill in the blank]?” or “Did you investigate this specific aspect of the situation?” During a past project, Jody remembers that she shared preliminary data about a website’s usability with a stakeholder. The usability findings were interesting, providing insight about user patterns and most frequently visited sections. This specific stakeholder quickly jumped in with questions like, “Did you ask managers what they thought?” and “Are you sure you gave them enough time to respond?” The stakeholder’s excitement and questions about the data gave the impression that they were requesting additional feedback or data points. However, Jody was able to share the project limitations and delimitations with the stakeholder to describe the scope of work—what she decided to include, not include, and why. Being prepared with this information was an effective way to address the stakeholder’s concerns and define the scope of work throughout the project.

As you design the needs assessment, discuss the limitations and delimitations associated with your stakeholders to reach consensus, and then document them within the project scope. Use the prompts in Table 1-2 to identify constraints.

Table 1-2. Prompts to Uncover Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations	Delimitations
• What is the specific project scope, and why? • What methods are available to collect data? • What resources and attributes of the working environment support your plan? • What barriers are in place?	• What information are you <i>not</i> going to gather? • What is an adjacent topic that’s <i>not</i> within the scope? • Why are you <i>not</i> collecting the information?

We recommend revisiting constraints throughout a need assessment project—often, you’ll identify additional limitations and delimitations as the work progresses.

Identifying Success Metrics for Recommendations

- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** If stakeholders expect the needs assessment results to include recommendations for ways to solve the problem, you need to know how to evaluate potential solutions. In other words, if you’re providing recommendations, how will you know if those recommendations will solve the problem?
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** If your role is to assess the problem but not make recommendations for solving it, you can skip this step. If the needs assessment project is small, or the goal is to solve a problem with minor-to-medium business impact, you may be able to revisit recommendations after key findings are shared with stakeholders and not necessarily need to include solutions in your results. Be sure to align with stakeholders on their expectations for recommendations.
 - ▶ **What’s the MVP?** The MVP for each needs assessment will vary based on stakeholders’ expectations and project goals. Best practice is to include a scale of options for recommendations:
 - Solutions that are inexpensive and can be implemented quickly to provide some improvement for the problem
 - Solutions that require a small investment or more time but can solve more of the problem
 - More expensive or longer term solutions that may completely solve the problem
-

Remember that conducting a needs assessment works best if you work backward. Before you start brainstorming recommendations for solutions to solve a problem, you want to identify the metrics that you’ll use to evaluate the effectiveness of any potential solutions. In collaboration with your stakeholders, decide how you will measure the results of solutions before implementing them. Those metrics may include KPIs, OKRs, and ROI:

- **Key performance indicators (KPIs).** Current state measures and benchmarks—KPIs measure what is as of today.
- **Objectives and key results (OKRs).** Goals and milestones—OKRs are metrics for the goal state and measure progress.
- **Return on investment (ROI).** Cost of the solution versus the return on results—ROI measures value.

You'll learn more about building recommendations in chapter 4, but for now, keep the goal results in mind as you work with stakeholders to plan the needs assessment strategy. Once the problem, current state, and goal state are clearly defined, it will be much easier to determine success measures.

Identifying Value Measures for the Needs Assessment

- ▶ **Why is this important for your strategy plan?** Demonstrating the value of a needs assessment justifies the time, effort, and cost (if applicable) of the project. This is especially important if the needs assessment requires time from many employees or a budget, or if stakeholders require specific results that affect major business areas or initiatives.
 - ▶ **When can you skip it?** Small-scale projects, those that only require a few total hours of employees' time, or those that could be completed quickly and easily may not require justification.
 - ▶ **What's the MVP?** You should be able to explain why the needs assessment was worth completing. The MVP might be a statement such as "The needs assessment results help us identify [*specific training needs*] that will help us close the skills gap in support of our strategic plan."
-

Needs assessments are filled with value-packed insights, but identifying the valuable measurements can be a tough job. Calculating the real value of a needs assessment can have two parts: the value of recommended solutions (if implemented) and the value of the needs assessment. By showing the value of the needs assessment, you will gain buy-in, increase leaders' and stakeholders' understanding of the value of needs assessments, and increase your team's role as a trusted business partner.

However, many needs assessment projects, while incredibly valuable to an organization, don't include the financial metrics required to calculate ROI. If you

can't calculate ROI, work backward to identify the potential value measures of your needs assessment. Envision the end of the project and consider how the needs assessment helped the company identify gaps and solutions, as well as the time, effort, and money that may be saved as a result.

Part of working backward is thinking ahead to the result, and that means strategizing how you might show the value of the needs assessment work before it's even begun. See chapter 8 for strategies and questions to help you brainstorm ways to measure the value of your needs assessment project.



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Needs Assessment Strategy and Best Practices

Want to learn more about needs assessment theory, approaches, and best practices? These are some of our favorite resources:

- Catherine M. Sleezer, Darlene F. Russ-Eft, and Kavita Gupta, *A Practical Guide to Needs Assessment*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2014).
- Hadiya Nuriddin, "Get the Whole Picture With a Performance Assessment," *TD at Work* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2018).
- Beth McGoldrick and Deborah D. Tobey, *Needs Assessment Basics*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2016).
- Kristopher Newbauer, *Aligning Instructional Design With Business Goals: Make the Case and Deliver Results* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2023).
- ATD (Association for Talent Development), *Needs Assessment: Design and Execution for Success* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2018).

A Shoestring Summary

As you develop your needs assessment strategy, ensure that you have gathered all the elements of your planning worksheet and reviewed them with your stakeholders. Like a detective organizing a case file, this foundational planning will help you gather the necessary information to accurately determine needs and requirements for planning effective solutions. Before you begin collecting data, be sure you've identified the following elements:

- The key problem—current state, future state, known gaps, and business impact

- Stakeholders
- Methodology—research questions, data collection, and data analysis
- Scope, expectations, and resources available for the needs assessment
- Constraints—limitations and delimitations
- Success metrics for evaluating recommendations and solutions
- ROI measures for the needs assessment
- The plan for sharing needs assessment results and recommendations

And as a reminder, the best place to start is with identifying the problem. The intake discussion (when you first meet with a sponsor about a needs assessment project) is important, and not having answers to your intake questions can cost you serious time and effort down the road. Some of the most important intake questions include:

1. When did this problem start?
2. What is causing this problem?
3. What needs to change to solve this problem?
4. What is currently driving the need for this change?
5. What has already been tried to solve it?
6. What will happen if we don't solve this problem?
7. How will you know if this problem is solved?

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About the Authors



Kelly L. Jones, PhD, is a researcher, leader, consultant, and problem solver with expertise in building solutions that help people and organizations learn. She has 20 years of experience in curriculum development, instructional design, needs assessments, learning technologies, and workplace training and development. She holds a PhD in curriculum and instruction from Mercer University, and a CPTD certification from ATD.



Jody N. Lumsden, EdD, is a consultant, speaker, and facilitator with expertise developing and implementing strategy and data-driven performance metrics in the areas of adult and workplace learning, curriculum planning, change management, and leadership coaching. She has 17 years of professional experience as a talent development and graphic design practitioner. She holds a doctorate in curriculum design and instruction from McKendree University.

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Our customers and members work in public and private organizations in every industry sector. Since ATD was founded in 1943, the talent development field has expanded significantly to meet the needs of global businesses and emerging industries. Through the Talent Development Capability Model, education courses, certifications and credentials, memberships, industry-leading events, research, and publications, we help talent development professionals build their personal, professional, and organizational capabilities to meet new business demands with maximum impact and effectiveness.

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