

A Systems Approach to Needs Assessment

**HERE IS A FLEXIBLE AND
CONSISTENT WAY TO ASSESS
YOUR ORGANIZATION'S
TRAINING NEEDS, USING
SEVEN SIMPLE STEPS.**

BY SAM MCCLELLAND

In recent years, training needs assessments, or TNAs, have gained popularity with organizational management. Organizations are recognizing the worth of the information a TNA yields because it provides a snapshot of their human resource skill and knowledge levels.

This skill and knowledge inventory can lead to detailed training that is focused on areas where the greatest needs exist. The bottom line for management is that the TNA will provide a means of identifying areas where the firm can obtain maximum value for the training and development dollar.

Exactly what constitutes a needs assessment? Opinions vary. Some trainers support less complicated approaches, such as generalized surveys. Others support more comprehensive and detailed methodologies that may include surveys, random interviews to correlate the results, and continued analysis not only to determine existing needs but also to define future HRD requirements.

Whichever method you choose, a systems approach to TNA will help you illustrate how the assessment

process integrates into the strategic plans of the entire organization. A systems approach can emphasize consistent and flexible ways to achieve ongoing analysis of the organization's human resources and the skills that will be required as a result of changes in the long-range plan. It can also help you identify a cost-effective, efficient means of meeting the skill and knowledge requirements that will most certainly be brought about by future changes.

What is a system?

In general, a "system" implies order or a defined structure. A system is actually a collection of procedures or components that are interactive with each other.

In a hierarchical system, components generally rely, and to a degree are predicated, on one another—component "A" must be initiated or activated before component "B," because "A" contains properties that "B" will require. Likewise, "B" must be initiated before "C", and so on. In an open system, each component has a relative degree of independence; it is

not dependent on other components.

The systems approach to a TNA bridges both types of systems. It is hierarchical in nature, but it is also open, in that each component is not strictly interdependent on any of the others.

The systems approach

Essentially, there are seven major steps to using a systems approach to needs assessment.

1. Determine whether to use internal or external resources. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. Many organizations believe that a TNA is not relevant unless it is conducted by an external consultant. They have a point.

Outside experts can bring a certain degree of neutrality to a project, because they are not as affected as employees are by the organization's culture. Outside experts can be relatively unbiased because they don't begin the project with preconceived notions or ideas regarding the results to be generated by the TNA.

An outside expert can focus directly on the TNA without being affected by forces that most employees would be subjected to.

There are some drawbacks to using a consultant:

- ▶ An external consultant is likely to cost more than an internal expert.
- ▶ Internal HRD specialists may feel that they lose some control of the assessment when they use a consultant.
- ▶ Upper management may resist opening the organization to external scrutiny.

2. Define the goals of the assessment. Avoid injecting any preconceived notions about what you expect the results to yield. Try to define selectively the goals of the assessment. If the assessment is general in nature, the goals of the project will also be general. If the assessment focuses on a particular skill, the goals will be fairly specific.

The goals of the assessment serve as the reference point from which all steps in the process are drawn. The data produced by the assessment should reflect directly on the goals that are outlined at the onset of the project.

3. Gain management commitment. Regardless of who conducts the

needs assessment, the entire project will be doomed from the start if you don't have the full confidence, commitment, and support of senior management.

Your chances for gaining such support will be greater if the goals or objectives of the assessment are defined in relatively specific terms. For example, in most companies, the statement, "the TNA should be conducted to define training needs" would not be specific enough to gain senior management support for the needs assessment. From management's perspective, training is a cost for which immediate and tangible returns are not always received.

A better approach might be to illustrate how the organization's training and development dollars will be committed to developing training in response to needs or skills deficiencies identified by the TNA.

4. Select the most appropriate methodology. You can employ many different assessment techniques and methods. The one you select should complement the organization's culture and structure. For example, in a large organization in which assessment goals are narrowly defined, it might be best to use a written survey, with random personal interviews to correlate the results of the survey. This approach will provide a detailed consensus and can focus on any areas you want to assess.

If the organization is small, you may prefer to use focus groups or individual interviews that specifically address areas of interest. In most instances, such forums can provide the level of detailed feedback you want.

The key elements to consider when selecting which assessment methodology to use:

- ▶ the degree of exactness required
- ▶ the time needed to conduct the assessment
- ▶ availability of experienced personnel (either internal or external) to conduct the assessment
- ▶ cost factors, whether you are using an internal or external resource
- ▶ the ability to keep surveys or interviews confidential.

5. Administer and control the assessment. The methodology you choose for the assessment should determine the parameters for administering and

controlling the project. This includes collecting survey instruments (assuming you use a written survey), tabulating data, scheduling personal interviews, determining costs, obtaining clerical and administrative support, and generally keeping the project on schedule and within cost parameters.

If you use an external consultant, clearly delineate administrative issues from the start. Specifically identify each person's responsibilities and the deadlines for meeting these responsibilities. A little thoughtful planning at the start will provide a smoother project later on.

6. Analyze the results. Regardless of which methodologies you use and who actually conducts the assessment, the data you collect make up the most important product of a systems approach. But the results of even the most meticulously defined assessments will contain variables that may be hard to quantify or identify.

You should regularly refer to the initial assessment goals so that information relating directly to those goals is at the forefront. Information that is peripheral to the goals of the assessment should be considered secondary.

For example, assume that the major goal of the TNA is "to identify people who require or would benefit from interpersonal skills training." Information relating to training in communications skills would be relevant, but it would be secondary to the principal goal.

It is important to be neutral when analyzing the results of an assessment. It is virtually impossible to prevent your own interpretation of the information from influencing your analysis and recommendations, but it is wise to keep such influences to a minimum so that you can clearly and concisely interpret and analyze the data.

7. Present upper management with the results and recommendations. Be prepared to justify your recommendations. Have the data available to substantiate your findings. If you use any statistics to analyze the results, it may be best to avoid quoting the statistical information in your presentation. But make the statistical computations available, perhaps as

an appendix to the final report.

If actual training programs or formats are part of the recommendations, include as part of the formal report a topical outline for each, complete with a statement of objectives and estimated costs.

Strategic value

For years, HRD professionals have emphasized the values of integrating training and development into the strategic planning process. Many organizations have begun to recognize the importance and cost-effectiveness of such issues, but there is still a great deal of resistance and apathy to such integration.

For some organizations, compliance with government or other regulations requires ongoing skill upgrading and retraining as a regular part of the cost of doing business. The systems approach provides them with a means of outlining the skill levels that currently exist and those that will be required in the future.

In industries in which technological change is prevalent, the systems approach provides a means of identifying and forecasting possible future skill or knowledge deficiencies. This ability allows organizations to plan for training or retraining on a consistent and realistic basis.

Needs assessment should be seen as integrated sets of procedures rather than groups of disproportionate elements. A systems approach can provide the basis for an ongoing means by which training needs can be efficiently defined and addressed in a cost-effective manner. Organizations that take a systems approach to training needs assessment may find windows of opportunity to assess not only existing skills, but also the skills that will be required to keep abreast of the rapid changes in business and technology.

Such organizations will gain value in committing their training and development dollars to activities that will be of benefit not only in the short term, but in the future as well. ■

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