How to Analyze Needs

Learn the rudiments of good needs analysis with this step-by-step guide.

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A needs analysis determines whether a training program is really necessary. It is important to begin a needs analysis with a clear understanding of how it will benefit the organization. What is expected, and what will happen as a result of it? Many other issues must also be addressed: How far-reaching should the needs analysis be—should it stretch to the executive officers, the corporate officers, the divisions, the regions, the plants? What are the best methods to use in conducting the needs analysis? Will they interrupt the work process?

The following steps can serve as a guide for each needs analysis you do:

- Identify present competencies and shortcomings in services offered.
- Determine the short-term and long-term objectives of the needs analysis.
- Identify the population to be studied. Should the entire organization be addressed, or just certain levels?
- Select the sample population.*
- Determine the format for data collection.
- Determine the need for ready-made or custom-designed inventory.
- Administer the inventory.*
- Conduct the interviews.*
- Analyze and compile data.*
- Chart the results, per participant and per category.
- List findings and support data.
- Identify problem areas.
- Design development strategies.
- Prepare the report.

*where appropriate

A main consideration in a needs analysis is timing. When is the best time to conduct it? It is difficult to gain valid information during a turbulent period at an organization. Each division and department should be considered according to its present situation and to the possible impact of changes on that division or department. What new needs will surface?

Once the question of "when" is answered, it is time to think about "how." When analyzing the "how" and looking at the entire corporation, several considerations surface. The format proposed here is flexible enough to address each one.

The first consideration is the target population. It is best to design a needs analysis for administration to different levels. Each level must be approached differently. For the top executives, one-on-one interviews with highly structured questions work best. The analysis should be conducted in an informal environment by someone outside the organization who has a working knowledge of your business, strategies and objectives. Cost prohibits one-on-one interviews with each member of a department. Therefore, when analyzing a department's needs, it's best to administer a needs inventory to department personnel, and conduct one-on-one interviews the next day with a random sampling of those employees. These interviews should differ from those with the top executives. The department interviews are only to clarify the findings from the needs inventory taken the previous day. This procedure is vital; it separates the real problems and needs from the symptoms.

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Instrument selection for the needs analysis should be based on the criteria that follow.

Administrative concerns

Members of the training department should assess their special concerns. It's important to determine the amount of time, knowledge and experience required to prepare, administer, score and interpret the results of the instrument. The objective: to administer the instrument in a minimum amount of time and with the least amount of disruption.

The process should not drag on forever. It should take 1,000 people one week to complete the inventory, and the final report should be presented at the end of the following week.

The training department must determine how much they will be involved in the administering of the instrument. Will they need training, and is training available? How objective is the scoring? Objectively scored instruments avoid the problem of needing special scoring skills and, more importantly, make it easier for the respondents to accept the accuracy of the results.

Another consideration is the complexity of the scoring. Complicated scales for scoring are time-consuming and require additional costs.

The advantage of an instrument is that it is easy to administer, it can be accomplished quickly and with little disruption to the work place, it can be administered in groups, and it can be scored on a computer quickly and accurately. This feature frees the training department from scoring and interpretation, and requires no special training of the staff.

The instrument must be reliable. It should yield the same results for the same people on separate occasions, given the same conditions. The instrument must also be valid. There must be a logical, clear connection between the instrument and the content it is to measure. The instrument also must provide concrete evidence that the scores it shows are related to measurable behavioral characteristics of the persons tested.

Respondent concerns

Any instrument used must be judged by its appropriateness to the participants. Participants' language and jargon, negative reactions and familiarity must all be considered. Is the instrument well received and understood by the participants? The respondents, when reviewing the report of findings, should agree with the report.

Figure 1—Training and Development Assessment Profile Sheet

1. Organizational Pride
2. Performance
3. Employee/Supervisor Relationship
4. Communication
5. Interpersonal Relations
6. Training and Development Needs
7. Career Planning

−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%
−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%
−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%
−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%
−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%
−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%
−100%	−50%	0%	+50%	+100%

This eliminates any threatening connotations an exercise like this may carry, and evokes a totally participatory feeling among the individual, his or her department and the training department.

Practicality

Expense is a strong determining factor. Who supplies the inventory and owns the copyright? Is the instrument adaptable, and can it be "massaged" to produce the data you seek? Can the analysis be administered in-house, or must it be done by external sources?

Training department concerns

Training department concerns also must be taken into account. For instance, it makes a difference who conducts the interviews, administers the inventory and prepares the analysis. A thorough analysis will most likely yield more than training needs. It will isolate and identify strengths of different departments. Many problems within a department can not be resolved by a training program; they must be addressed by other means. It's important to consider whether the report will include these areas and suggest methods for their resolution. A definite plus is information that identifies current needs—those that should be addressed immediately by the training department. This information is helpful in establishing priorities, the extent of specific needs, and the depth and scope of those needs. As this information is gathered, it provides the basis for a comprehensive, integrated development plan. A training program that provides this relevant service is a valuable resource to the organization.

Interviews

There are several benefits to conducting interviews. First, the information is a good supplement to data from the instrument and observations. Second, when people are interviewed they feel more involved in achieving the objectives of the needs analysis. Interviews also encourage people to get things off their chests, which is very helpful in obtaining acceptance for training programs. Plus, some people express their points of view better one-on-one than on a written questionnaire.

Interviews serve as clarifiers; they clear up assumptions and promote a better understanding of the facts. They uncover the roots of problems and problem areas.

Interviewing helps you build a rapport with individuals in an organization. It enables you to become familiar with their language, plus shows that you think people are important.

Even the best of strategies have cautions. Some things to pay special attention to in interviews are:

- *Perceptions.* Some people feel threatened by interviews. Participation, therefore, should be voluntary.
- *Cost.* Interviews are expensive in terms of time, space and staff.
- *Scheduling.* Interviews can be disruptive to the organization, especially if employees travel frequently.
- *Staying on track.* It is sometimes easy to become so involved that the interview turns into a coaching or counseling session.

Sometimes it is possible and effective to interview several people simultaneously. The best results, though, usually are obtained from private interviews in a comfortable, non-threatening setting. There should be no interruptions during interviews.

Effective interviewing requires extensive preparation plus training in interviewing techniques. The interviewer must have a game plan. Will the session be structured or played by ear?

Three techniques—probing, clarifying and supporting—work well for needs analysis interviews. Here is a suggested interviewing process:

- *Do your homework.* Observe the department. Get to know the working environment.
- *Prepare participants.* Thoroughly introduce the participants to the interview process.
- *Start the interview.* To break the ice, exchange some information regarding goals, procedures and confidentiality. Do not take notes or use a tape recorder.
- *Get information.* Create a rapport and a climate for understanding. Exercise good listening skills and pay attention to "free information."
- *Close your interview.* Assume the responsibility for ending the interview, and end it in a comfortable, businesslike manner.
- *Analyze the information.* Do a statistical summary of the responses. Be wary of translating all the data according to your personal theoretical system. Keep the analysis objective.
- *Report on the analysis.* Share the analysis with the interviewees. Remember to maintain confidentiality. Each person should know what reporting procedure will be used.

Following are points to remember when interviewing: Listen patiently; keep an open mind; show sincere interest; get the full story; get the facts straight; discuss, but don't argue; watch your personal bias; maintain confidentiality.

Consulting model

After a needs analysis is implemented, reports should show the strengths, systems and interpersonal areas to be addressed. Once these areas are identified, the training department can play a vital internal consulting role to department managers. The training department should prepare a consulting model, customized for each department. Some areas that may be included in the consulting model are:

- *Organizational pride.* How do the department members feel about their group? Are they proud to be a part of the organization?
- *Performance.* Are department members productive? Are they performing as well as they should and could? What is the climate of the department?
- *Employee/supervisor relationship.* How is the relationship? What could be improved? Where are there problems?
- *Communication.* Do they receive the information they need? Is it timely and sufficient and sent through orderly channels, or is it sent through the grapevine? Is communication open and honest?
- *Interpersonal relations.* Is there conflict between department members? How is it handled? What changes would help?
- *Training and development needs.* What is needed for growth and development? What does the department need to become more productive?
- *Career planning.* What is the predominant career path of department members? Where in the organization can they go?

Figure 1 depicts a training and development profile sheet used to measure the amount of change needed in these areas. It can be a useful tool when scoring is based on a numerical scale or any scale that can be converted to numbers.

Summary

Most organizations spend millions of dollars a year curing symptoms though not knowing the true causes. When needs have been correctly identified, companies can design a corrective action plan—whether it be training or some other type of plan—that is applicable. It should be expedient and cost-effective, providing the greatest return on investment possible.

An organization must know why it requires a needs analysis. In selecting the type, format and focus of the analysis, you must be certain you are addressing the organizational need. Although it may be costly, flexibility and proper administration of the analysis plus proper scoring and conciseness in the report are vital to the success of the needs analysis. The costs of a good needs analysis should be viewed as a one-time expenditure that is an investment in the future.