

Chapter 1: What is needs assessment?

Chapter objectives:

- Identify why needs assessment is important
- Identify what you can do if your “client” doesn’t want to spend the time and money to do an assessment
- Identify different types of needs analysis

Tools:

- Select the right type of needs analysis chart

Chapter questions:

- What is needs assessment?
- Why do a needs assessment?
- Why are needs assessments valuable to an organization?
- How can you convince your client to invest in a needs assessment effort?
- What are the different types of needs assessments?
- What is involved in the process of conducting a needs assessment?

WHAT IS NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

A needs assessment is the process of collecting information about an expressed or implied organizational need that could be met by conducting training. The need can be a desire to improve current performance or to correct a deficiency. A deficiency is a performance that does not meet the current standard. It means that there is a prescribed or best way of doing a task and that variance is creating a problem. The needs assessment process helps the trainer and the person requesting training specify the training need or performance deficiency. Assessments can be formal (using survey and interview techniques) or informal (asking a few questions of those involved).

In this book, the term *needs assessment* is a general term for a three phase process to collect information, analyze it and create a training plan. Different types of assessments are called *needs analysis*, such as performance analysis, job/task analysis, target population analysis, etc.

WHY DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

The purpose of a needs assessment is to answer some familiar questions: why, who, how, what, and when.

1. Why conduct the training: be sure to tie the performance deficiency to a business need and be sure the benefits of conducting the training are greater than the problems being caused by the performance deficiency.
2. Who is involved in the training: be sure to involve appropriate parties in the deficiency. This might involve employees, supervisors, internal and external customers.

3. How can the performance deficiency be fixed: be sure training can fix the performance deficiency or suggest other remediation if training is not appropriate.
4. What is the best way to perform: be sure there is a better or preferred way to do a task to get better results. Often compliance with governmental regulations is a consideration in looking at best practices or required methods.
5. When will training take place: be sure of the best timing to deliver training.

If trainers already know the answers to these five issues, then they know whether or not training would be appropriate. Sometimes trainers mistakenly assume that the person requesting the training has already determined the answers to these five issues and proceed to conduct training without raising these questions. A training plan that reports the conclusions from a needs assessment provides a road map that describes a business issue, problems and deficiencies that training can address, and how that will be accomplished.

WHY ARE NEEDS ASSESSMENTS VALUABLE TO AN ORGANIZATION?

Conducting a needs assessment protects the assets of an organization and assures that resources set aside to address training issues are conserved and used only for that purpose. A needs assessment can help determine if training is the appropriate solution to a performance deficiency. If increasing an employee's knowledge and skills will not help resolve a deficiency, then training is not appropriate. Conducting training without assuring there is a need is a waste of time and resources.

HOW CAN YOU CONVINCING YOUR CLIENT TO INVEST IN A NEEDS ASSESSMENT EFFORT?

Sometimes trainers are asked to conduct training without “bothering” to conduct a needs assessment. The client who requests training may be convinced that the course they request is exactly what the target population who will attend the training needs. The client might contend that conducting a needs assessment is a waste of time and resources. It is appropriate to respect the opinions of the client. However, trainers need to acknowledge their judgment by presenting appropriate training.

Think of conducting a needs assessment as investing a bit of time in coming up with the right solution and a greater return on the time invested. Begin by asking the person requesting the training (the client) the questions about the five purposes (why, who, how, what, and when). This assures the client that the training program will be more successful if customized for the specific target population. If the person you are asking doesn't know the answers to your questions, maybe this person is not the actual client and is a messenger for the client. A client is the decision maker who has the *organizational authority* to make decisions to: implement programs and projects, stop the project, and extend and expand the project. A client also has a *need* to be involved and make strategic project decisions and is the person who must ultimately be pleased with the results of the training. If possible, speak directly to the client, rather than through an intermediary who may not have the same facts and opinions as the client.

Even if the client may think a needs assessment is not required, ask questions (why, who, how, what, and when) to confirm your understanding of the training request. Make suggestions about how to customize and tailor the existing training and best meet the needs of the client. When you begin asking questions of the client, you are already

conducting an informal needs assessment. Not asking these five types of questions before conducting training can result in difficulties later.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF NEEDS ASSESSMENTS?

There are different types of needs assessments that seek a variety of types of information about the proposed training. Each type of assessment is called an analysis. Using the five purposes of needs assessments listed earlier; here are the more formal types of analyses. The name of the type of analysis is given in italics:

1. Why conduct the training: Tie the performance deficiency to a business need (*needs versus wants analysis*) and the benefits of conducting the training are greater than the problems being caused by the deficiency (*feasibility analysis*).
2. Who is involved in the training: Involve appropriate parties concerned about the deficiency (*target population analysis*).
3. How can the deficiency be fixed: Training can fix the performance deficiency (*performance analysis*).
4. What is the best way to perform: Identify if there is a better or preferred way to do a task to get results (*job/task analysis*).
5. When will training take place: What is the best timing to deliver the training and what are the other requirements to deliver the training (*contextual analysis*)?

Later chapters explain each type of analysis.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS OF CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

The process of conducting a needs assessment begins with an agreement with the client to define the deficiency. What type of assessment information will be developed? Next, how formal or informal will the assessment process be, and who will be involved. For example, if the deficiency involves customer complaints, agree on from whom and how will customer information be gathered. Will existing customer complaints be reviewed or will a new sampling of customers be surveyed to identify the extent of the deficiency? Which employees will be interviewed or surveyed? What types of questions will be asked to develop appropriate information about the complaints or performance deficiency? What experts will be assessed to learn the best way to perform a job or task? When is the best time to conduct the training? When will assessment information be reported back to the client in a training plan or at a feedback meeting?

How to develop this information unfolds in the later chapters of this book. There is a summary in figure 1.1 that shows each type of assessment and what type of information is developed. The next chapter deals with needs assessment competencies.

FIGURE 1.1

SELECT THE RIGHT TYPE OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT CHART

| Type of needs assessment | What the assessment answers |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Performance analysis or gap analysis | <p>Is this issue a skill deficiency?</p> <p>How can the deficiency be addressed?</p> <p>Is training the appropriate way to fix this deficiency?</p> <p>What are non-training issues?</p> |
| Feasibility analysis | <p>Why should this training be done?</p> <p>Is the benefit of training greater than the cost of the current deficiency?</p> |
| Needs versus wants analysis | <p>Why should this training be done?</p> <p>Is the deficiency is tied to a business need?</p> |
| Target population analysis | <p>Who is the audience for this training?</p> <p>What is known about them to help design and customize this training?</p> |
| Job/Task analysis | <p>What is the best and correct way to do this task?</p> <p>How can this job and task be broken down into teachable parts?</p> |

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|---------------------|--|
| Contextual analysis | When will the training be presented? What are the other requirements to deliver the training? |
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