

Bookshelf Ambassadors: Employee Training & Development

WHY IS NEEDS ASSESSMENT NECESSARY?

Needs assessment is important because a manager or other client asking for training (which focuses on closing skill gaps resulting from a lack of knowledge or skill) could really be asking for or need something else, such as employee motivation, changing perspectives or attitudes, or redesigning workflow.² If a manager requests training for a performance problem, what he or she is looking for is a solution to a problem that may (or may not) involve training. In conducting a needs assessment, your role is to determine if training is the appropriate solution.

Needs assessment is the first step in the instructional design process, and if it is not properly conducted, any one or more of the following situations could occur:

- Training may be incorrectly used as a solution to a performance problem (when the solution should deal with employee motivation, job design, or a better communication of performance expectations).
- Training programs may have the wrong content, objectives, or methods.
- Trainees may be sent to training programs for which they do not have the basic skills, prerequisite skills, or confidence needed to learn.
- Training will not deliver the expected learning, behavior change, or financial results that the company expects.
- Money will be spent on training programs that are unnecessary because they are unrelated to the company's business strategy.

Figure 3.1 shows the three types of analysis involved in needs assessment and the causes and outcomes that result. There are many different causes

or “pressure points” that suggest that training is necessary. These pressure points include performance problems, new technology, internal or external customer requests for training, job redesign, new legislation, changes in customer preferences, new products, or employees’ lack of basic skills. WakeMed, a North Carolina–based health-care system, spends more than \$2 118million on clinical, compliance, safety, and interpersonal skills training each year.³ The “pressure point” facing WakeMed has been transitioning all patient information from paper records to an electronic format. To give you an idea of the scope, more than 230,000 patients visit its emergency departments each year! Because the electronic health records were the single source of patient information, it was important that all employees having access to the system received training and demonstrated that they were competent in using it. To prepare for the transition, multiple departments worked together to design training plans to meet the needs of both clinical and nonclinical employees. Training was made available using a variety of methods, including instructor-led classes and online modules.

FIGURE 3.1 Causes and Outcomes of Needs Assessment

Note that these pressure points do not automatically mean that training is the correct solution. For example, consider a delivery truck driver whose job is to deliver anesthetic gases to medical facilities. The driver mistakenly hooks up the supply line of a mild anesthetic to the supply line of a hospital’s oxygen system, contaminating the hospital’s oxygen supply. Why did the driver make this mistake, which is clearly a performance problem? The driver may have made this mistake because of a lack of knowledge about the appropriate line hookup for the anesthetic, because of anger over a requested salary increase that his manager recently denied, or because of mislabeled valves for connecting the gas supply. Only the lack of knowledge can be addressed by training. The other pressure points require reviewing and making decisions related to the driver’s anger-motivated behavior (fire the driver) or the design of the work environment (remind supervisor and drivers to check to that valves and hookup lines are properly

labeled at all work sites).

What outcomes result from a needs assessment? Needs assessment provides important input into most of the remaining steps in the training design. As shown in Figure 3.1, the needs assessment process results in information related to who needs training and what trainees need to learn, including the tasks in which they need to be trained, plus knowledge, skill, behavior, or other job requirements. Needs assessment helps determine whether the company will outsource its training (i.e. purchase training from a vendor or consultant, or develop training through internal resources). Determining exactly what trainees need to learn is critical for the next step in the instructional design process: identifying learning outcomes and objectives. [Chapter Four](#), "Learning and Transfer of Training," explores identifying learning outcomes and learning objectives and creating a training environment so that learning occurs and is used on the job. Through identifying the learning outcomes and resources available for training, the needs assessment also provides information that helps the company choose the appropriate training or development method (discussed in [Part Three](#) of this book). Needs assessment also provides information regarding the outcomes that should be collected to evaluate training effectiveness. The process of evaluating training is discussed in [Chapter Six](#), "Training Evaluation."

WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

Because the goal of needs assessment is to determine whether a training need exists, who it exists for, and for what tasks training is needed, it is important that all stakeholders are included in the needs assessment.

Stakeholders include persons in the organization who have an interest in training and development and their support is important for determining its success (or failure). Stakeholders include company leaders and top-level managers, mid-level managers, trainers, and employees who are end users of learning. There are several ways to ensure that stakeholders are involved

in needs assessment. One way is through establishing formal advisory groups that meet on a regular basis to discuss learning issues. Another way is to ensure that relevant stakeholders are included in interviews, focus groups, crowdsourcing, and surveys used for needs assessment.

Traditionally, only trainers were concerned with the needs assessment process. But, as [Chapter Two](#) showed, as training increasingly becomes used to help the company achieve its strategic goals, both upper- and mid-level managers are involved in the needs assessment process.

Table 3.1 shows the questions that company leaders, mid-level managers, trainers, and employees are interested in answering for organizational analysis, person analysis, and task analysis. Company leaders include directors, CEOs, and vice presidents. Company leaders view the needs assessment process from the broader company perspective rather than focusing on specific jobs. Company leaders are involved in the needs assessment process to identify the role of training in relation to other human resource practices in the company (e.g., selection and compensation of employees). Company leaders want training to anticipate needs, aligned with where the business is going. Training and development needs to improve employee performance in such a way that it supports the business strategy. Learning efforts (training, development, knowledge management) need to be an integrated and holistic approach (rather than a series of fragmented courses and programs) that adds value to the company. Company leaders are also involved in identifying what business functions or units need training (person analysis) and in determining if the company has the knowledge, skills, and abilities in the workforce that are necessary to meet its strategy and be competitive in the marketplace. Mid-level managers are more concerned with how training may affect the attainment of financial goals for the particular units they supervise. As a result, for mid-level managers, organizational analysis focuses on identifying (1) how much of their budgets they want to devote to training; (2) the types of employees who should receive training (e.g., engineers, or core employees who are directly involved in producing goods or providing

services); and (3) for what jobs training can make a difference in terms of improving products or customer service.

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TABLE 3.1 Key Concerns of Company Leaders, Mid-Level Managers, Trainers, and Employees in Needs Assessment

Hilton Worldwide has executive sponsors for each of its five different learning universities. The executive sponsors meet quarterly to review learning initiatives and discuss business needs. This helps the learning function stay in touch with the company's strategic goals and identify short- and long-term learning needs that are important for the business.⁴ IMG College is a collegiate sports marketing company, offering national, regional, and local marketing targeting college sports fans. IMG has a salesforce of more than four hundred employees who interact with schools, sponsors, and licensees to provide coaches' shows and endorsements; manage digital assets such as websites, mobile applications, and social media campaigns; and coordinate game-day events and hospitality.⁵ IMG determined that its salesforce had numerous training needs. The needs assessment included phone calls and meetings with senior leaders and middle managers. After reviewing their feedback, sixty-one different topics were identified as skill gaps and areas for improvement. To identify the most important and strategic gaps, IMG held a one-day retreat involving professionals from its training and development and human resources departments. Based on the retreat, twelve topics were chosen for training that aligned with the company's strategic plan and culture. Examples of the topics included effective communication skills, public safety, and financial skills.

As discussed in [Chapter Two](#), trainers (including training managers and instructional designers) need to consider whether training is aligned with the business strategy. However, trainers are primarily interested in needs

assessment to provide them with information that they need to administer, develop, and support training programs. This information includes determining if training should be purchased or developed in-house, identifying the tasks for which employees need to be trained, and determining upper- and mid-level managers' interest in and support for training.

Employees have several interests in needs assessment. From an organizational perspective they are concerned with how the company values learning: Is learning rewarded? Does learning help them improve their job performance or meet their career goals? Is it easy to get access to formal and informal learning opportunities? They also want to know if their manager can be expected to encourage them to take courses and programs, or informally learn, and if they will provide support to apply what they have learned. Employees have to determine if they are motivated to learn as well as what tasks, knowledge, skills, or competencies they need for their current job or career.

Company leaders are usually involved in determining whether training meets the company's strategy and then providing the appropriate financial resources. Upper-level managers are not usually involved in identifying which employees need training, the tasks for which training is needed, or the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics needed to complete those tasks. This is the role of subject-matter experts (SMEs).

Subject-matter experts (SMEs) are employees, academics, managers, technical experts, trainers, and even customers or suppliers who are knowledgeable with regard to (1) training issues, including tasks to be performed; (2) the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for successful task performance; (3) the necessary equipment; and (4) the conditions under which the tasks have to be performed. A key issue with SMEs is making sure that they are knowledgeable about the content that training must cover, as well as realistic enough to be able to prioritize what content is critical to cover in the time allotted for the subject in the training

curriculum. SMEs must also have information that is relevant to the company's business and have an understanding of the company's language, tools, and products. There is no rule regarding how many types of employees should be represented in the group conducting the needs assessment. Still, it is important to get a sample of **job incumbents** (employees who are currently performing the job) involved in the process because they tend to be most knowledgeable about the job and can be a great hindrance to the training process if they do not feel they have had input into the needs assessment.

Philips, the Dutch technology company, reinvented itself by limiting its focus to three business sectors: health care, lighting, and consumer lifestyle products.⁶ Philips also recognized the need to change its culture to react faster to the marketplace. It had to encourage employees to quickly develop new products to beat competitors, and, if the products were not successful, to abandon them and come up with new ideas. The cultural shift required a change in the company's learning and development structure to more closely align with the business. To understand the company's learning needs, the leader of the learning function and his team met with Philips's employees across all businesses to find out how they wanted to learn. For example, sales representatives expressed a preference for learning using short videos and podcasts that provide tips on sales skills such as closing a sale. This fit with their need to learn while traveling or meeting with customers. Also, they found that most employees would take online learning courses at home in the evening rather than at work, but they were often interrupted.

To conduct needs assessment at Saudi Aramco, a oil company headquartered in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, they relied on a team consisting of a professional development advisor who reports to the management team, a supporting advisory committee, and a group of subject matter experts.⁷ This team determines the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to be a successful performer in a specific job family such as

engineering production and drilling. The team also determines the training required to support more experienced professionals.