

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
- Identify the three phases in conducting a training needs assessment
- Learn how to set expectations and gain participation for needs assessment
- Decide who and what are assessed
- Overcome five issues when conducting needs assessment

Tools

- Select the Right Type of Needs Analysis Chart

Chapter Questions

- What is needs assessment?
- Why conduct a needs assessment?
- Why are needs assessments valuable to an organization?
- How are training needs assessments done?
- What is involved in the process of conducting a needs assessment?
- How can you convince your client to invest in a needs assessment effort?
- How can the trainer set expectations and gain participation when conducting a needs assessment?
- Who decides which people are involved and what measures are assessed?
- How are problems and barriers overcome when conducting a needs assessment?

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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 from it is creating a problem. The needs assessment process helps the trainer and the person requesting training to specify the training need or performance deficiency. Assessments can be formal (using survey and interview techniques) or informal (asking some 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, and so forth. Needs assessment often involves the use of more than one type of analysis.

Why Conduct a Needs Assessment?

The purpose of a needs assessment is to answer some familiar questions: why, who, how, what, and when. Following the definitions of each type of needs assessment is the common needs analysis term.

1. *Why* conduct the training: 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. Conduct two types of analysis to answer this question: (1) *needs versus wants analysis* and (2) *feasibility analysis*.
2. *Who* is involved in the training: involve appropriate parties to solve the deficiency. Conduct a *target population analysis* to learn as much as possible about those involved in the deficiency and how to customize a training program to capture their interest.
3. *How* can the performance deficiency be fixed: training can fix the performance deficiency or suggest other remediation if training is not appropriate. Conduct a *performance analysis* to identify what skill deficiency is to be fixed by a training remedy.

4. *What* is the best way to perform: there is a better or preferred way to do a task to get the best results. Are job performance standards set by the organization, such as standard operating procedures (SOPs)? Are there governmental regulations to consider when completing the task in a required manner? Conduct a *task analysis* to identify the best way to perform.
5. *When* will training take place: the best timing to deliver training because attendance at training can be impacted by business cycles, holidays, and so forth. Conduct a *contextual analysis* to answer logistics questions.

Not all five questions must be answered as part of a needs assessment process. Later chapters will discuss how to begin a needs assessment and which types of analysis are appropriate under certain circumstances.

If trainers already know the answers to these five questions, 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 whether 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 training need is a waste of time and resources. Chapter 2 offers suggestions to correct non-training deficiencies.

How Are Training Needs Assessments Done?

A training needs assessment is a three-phase process. Decide *how* to complete each type of analysis using these three phases.

1. *Gather information:* Any analysis involves gathering information to help make appropriate decisions. Gathering information can be the process of collecting existing information or developing new information. The process can be formal or informal and involves one or more of the six types of needs analysis listed later in this chapter. Chapter 3 addresses a variety of techniques to gather information.
2. *Analyze information:* After gathering information, analyze it, interpret it, and draw conclusions from the information. It is rarely appropriate or helpful if the trainer who gathers needs analysis information *independently* analyzes and interprets information and suggests conclusions. This phase of the needs assessment is most effective as a collaborative process that includes all stakeholders. Chapters 2 and 4 through 9 discuss different types of needs analysis.
3. *Create a training plan:* After analyzing and interpreting information and offering conclusions, the information becomes the basis for a training plan which proposes how to resolve the performance deficiency. Chapter 10 describes how to develop and present a training plan.

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 (or person requesting the training) 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 customer information will 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 consulted 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. Tool 1.1 shows a summary of each type of analysis and what type of information develops.



Tool 1.1. Select the Right Type of Needs Analysis Chart

Type of Needs Analysis	What the Analysis Answers
Performance analysis or gap analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> Is this issue a skill deficiency? <input type="checkbox"/> How can the deficiency be addressed? <input type="checkbox"/> Is training the appropriate way to fix this deficiency?
Feasibility analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> Why should this training be done? <input type="checkbox"/> Is the benefit of training greater than the cost of the current deficiency?
Needs versus wants analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> Why should this training be done? <input type="checkbox"/> Is the deficiency tied to a business need?
Goal analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> What is the specific behavior improvement behind a vague desire?
Job/task analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> What is the best and correct way to do this task? <input type="checkbox"/> How can this job and task be broken down into teachable parts?
Target population analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> Who is the audience for this training? <input type="checkbox"/> What is known about them to help design and customize this training? <input type="checkbox"/> What other populations might benefit from training?
Contextual analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> When will the training be presented? <input type="checkbox"/> What are the other requirements to deliver the training successfully?

How Can You Convince 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 have to trust their judgment by presenting appropriate training. This might mean asking several informal questions to identify whether the requested training is the right solution to a performance problem.

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) questions about the five purposes (why, who, how, what, and when). This assures the client that the training program will be more successful when course content is 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 and 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.

Although 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 and 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 is irresponsible, since the client may end up with an inappropriate solution.

Some clients can be convinced by examples or testimonials from other clients about the importance of conducting a needs assessment. Others may agree to a needs assessment when the benefits to the bottom line are demonstrated. Drafting a quick feasibility analysis can be helpful. Chapter 4 provides information about how to conduct a feasibility analysis.

How Can the Trainer Set Expectations and Gain Participation When Conducting a Needs Assessment?

The key to setting expectations is agreeing on the above stated three-phased process with the client when identifying the performance deficiency. It is critical to agree on an outcome or objective with the client rather than agree to conduct a specific training program or event. For example, if the client asks the trainer to present a time management workshop and agrees to a bit of customizing activities in the workshop, then the client expects the trainer to deliver a slightly customized workshop. However, if the client agrees that the trainer ought to investigate ways to help his or her staff work “smarter, not harder,” then different expectations have been set. Perhaps training will be a part of the solution, or perhaps not.

To gain participation from stakeholders, such as managers, supervisors, and the target population, identify the benefit for each stakeholder to participate in the needs assessment process. Also, gain the client’s approval to involve each stakeholder. If approval for involving all stakeholders is not within the client’s area of supervision, seek additional approval at higher levels in the organization. After identifying benefits and gaining approvals, identify each person’s role and how he or she can contribute to the assessment process. Agree on a decision-making process and first assignments, and gain commitment to the next meeting.

Who Decides Which People Are Involved and What Measures Are Assessed?

The trainer who conducts the needs assessment may suggest or identify stakeholders to involve in the assessment and what measures to assess. It is usually the client who makes the decision proposed by the trainer. However, this is only one model for decision making. Different organizations have different decision-making processes. When union employees are involved, a union employee representative is also involved. Some organizations prefer a cross-functional task force to make decisions about the three phases of a needs assessment. To avoid raising additional issues or barriers, be sensitive to *who* makes decisions and to *how* decisions are made in your organization.

How Are Problems and Barriers Overcome When Conducting a Needs Assessment?

Five types of problems or barriers can arise when conducting a needs assessment. Before conducting an assessment, plan how to deal with or avoid these five issues:

1. Confidential Information

Tell those who offer information during the assessment whether the information they offer is confidential (what people say is not told to others) or anonymous (information is shared, but not who said what). Either do not ask for the name of the person completing a survey, or offer the option to provide a name. Generally, respondents are more forthcoming if they can remain anonymous. Provide an anonymous means to return the survey, perhaps in a sealed envelope, or use an electronic survey that is completed at a secure website. Consider having the results tabulated by someone outside the organization. Be sure to clarify concerns about how interview or survey information will be used.

2. Management Buy-In

Management (the client) needs to be involved during all three phases of a needs assessment (gather information, analyze information, and create a training plan). Sell the purpose and benefits of the survey or interviews to all the client's managers who are involved with the deficiency prior to collecting information. Tie the survey data to the strategic plan and/or performance review processes. Demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of gathering survey information. Anticipate management's needs and focus the survey on key work processes. Promote the purpose and benefits of the survey with supervisors and managers.

3. Unwilling Employees or Participants

Employees or customers may not be willing to spend a lot of time to complete a survey or an interview. To increase participation in information gathering, have a top executive send a cover letter with the survey or, prior to an interview, ask for the employee's cooperation in completing the survey or giving an interview. If a collective bargaining unit is involved, include their support in a cosigned cover letter with management. Get key employees to be good will ambassadors for the process. Tell the purpose of collecting the information and what will be done as a result. Sending a survey or conducting interviews sets the

expectation that *something* will be done with the information. Make the distribution, the completion and return of the survey, or conducting an interview as convenient as possible. Perhaps place an article in the organization's newsletter telling the purpose of the survey or interviews and when it will be distributed.

4. Cost

During the needs assessment process, the performance deficiency usually continues. Promote the gathering of information as an investment in the progress of the organization. Do a feasibility analysis on the savings from conducting the survey or interviews versus not doing anything. Often commonly held assumptions can be validated or changed when hard data is gathered. Use existing data regarding the deficiency to avoid the cost of asking for what is already available.

5. Interrupts Work

Time is money. Taking employees away from productive work to complete a survey or an interview may detract from job results. Keep the survey brief, streamlined, and attractive in appearance. Insert the survey in the employee's paycheck or have completion coincide with the first day of another event. When conducting interviews, write out key questions prior to the interview. Set specific appointments with a starting and ending time. Depending on the complexity of the performance issues, most one-on-one interviews beyond 30 to 60 minutes usually fail to gather significant information.

After planning to address each of the five barriers and understanding the three phases of needs assessment, you are ready to identify different techniques to gather information.

The case study that follows will help illustrate how to deal with several issues about needs assessment addressed in this chapter.

CASE STUDY: IS THIS A SWEET DEAL?¹

Directions: Review the situation below and identify what information Pete ought to develop through a needs assessment before presenting the Vice President with a cost-effective solution to their personnel issues. What types of analysis would you suggest he conduct?

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Pete is the training coordinator at Sweet Life Inc., a fast-growing chain of retail candy shops. The shops are located in large malls and offer a variety of “home made” type sweets. Each shop has at least four people on shift during store hours. There is a manager and three staff people who cook, clean, and sell.

The vice president of store operations is concerned about the quality of store personnel, who are recruited, interviewed, oriented, and trained in the variety of demanding tasks. All of these tasks and more fall on the already burdened shoulders of the store manager. After several discussions with the VP of store operations, Pete’s first thought is to improve the interviewing skills of store managers. This type of training would help improve the quality of store personnel hired by the store managers. Pete has the VP’s approval to work toward a solution, but keep the cost down.

1. What is the purpose or objective of conducting a needs assessment?
2. What type of information does Pete need to develop before proceeding with interviewing skills training? What types of analysis should he conduct?
3. Who should be involved in the assessment?

Possible Case Answers

1. The purpose of the needs assessment is to identify how to improve the quality of store personnel that are recruited, interviewed, oriented, and trained.
2. What type of information does Pete need to develop and ask before proceeding with interviewing skills training?
 - What are the vice president’s concerns about the quality of store personnel? (*Use a task analysis and target population analysis.*)
 - What are the current recruitment and hiring practices and what is the cause of quality deficiencies? (*Conduct a performance analysis.*)

- To what extent are store managers burdened and how does this affect the recruitment, hiring, orienting, and training of new employees? (*Conduct a job analysis.*)
 - How would skills training in interviewing improve the situation? (*Conduct a task analysis and feasibility analysis.*)
 - Is the suspected lack of skills to recruit, hire, orient, and train employees a widespread deficiency for all store managers? (*Conduct a target population analysis.*)
2. Who should be involved in the assessment?
- VP of operations
 - Store managers from a variety of stores

Not every type of needs analysis is used in this situation. This case study will appear in later chapters to help explain the application of different types of needs analysis. The next chapter discusses performance analysis and why this type of analysis is usually completed before other types of analysis.