

Training Needs Assessment

Business training is a strategy with one primary goal: To improve the performance of the organization by developing the skills of its employees and managers. However, it's not always clear if this goal is accomplished in "soft" skill training in areas such as communication, managing people, managing change, etc.



There are a number of actions you can take to ensure your training programs consistently achieve their goals. The first step is to determine if training is the best strategy for improving performance. To do this, there are two questions to consider:

- Are there other factors that contribute to performance problems (e.g., constant delays, lack of information, staffing shortages, equipment problems)? It's better to correct these kinds of issues before conducting training, otherwise it can generate high levels of frustration in your training group.
- Do individuals fail to perform at higher skill levels because they don't know how or because they aren't sufficiently motivated? If they don't know how to perform at higher levels, training is critical. If they do know how but just don't do it, it's probably more of a management issue.

The answers to these questions will help you make sure that training really is the best strategy to attain performance improvement and that the time and money spent on it will be a good investment. If so, the next step is to use needs assessment methods to clearly identify performance gaps in specific skill areas. Performance gaps are the differences between desired performance and actual performance. When these gaps are pinpointed, training content and delivery methods can be designed to help close them.

There is no one best way of assessing training needs. Much depends on the skill area in question, the structure and culture of the organization and the time available. It's really nothing more than gathering information in a way that enables you to make a well-informed judgment about the size and nature of the target group's performance gap. Some information you may want to examine includes:



Financial metrics – Staying on-budget, meeting sales goals, reducing costs, amount of overtime, etc. are helpful as broad measures of individual and group performance



Operational metrics – Employee retention, absenteeism, lost-time accidents, etc. can be general indicators of possible problems



Anecdotal reports – Employee and customer complaints and comments, incident reports, managers' observations, exit interviews, etc. can provide specific behavioral information



Surveys – Can be helpful in gathering a large amount of information in a systematic way



Performance evaluations – These are designed for giving individual feedback but an overall review of your organization's evaluations can help identify possible training needs



360° assessments – Also designed for giving feedback to individuals from their direct supervisors and their co-workers, subordinates and, in some cases, customers. These can be used to identify training needs in the same way as performance evaluations.



Pre-training testing – This is topic-specific and can give an objective view of respondents' knowledge about the topic












Training Needs Assessment (continued ...)

Before implementing any training needs assessment, it's important to evaluate how helpful it will be in telling you what your real training needs are by asking these questions:

- Will the information reflect the training needs of a significant percentage of the target group?
- If the information is subjective, can it be verified using other methods?
- Will the information help identify trends?
- Will the information tie directly back to performance or behavior standards or organizational values?
- How much time, expense and difficulty will there be in using this method?

Here is an example of one training professional's evaluation of two methods of training needs assessment she was considering prior to developing a course on communication skills for first-line supervisors. She researched them through on-line search engines, professional training organizations and conversations with training professionals within and outside of her company, then developed these analyses.

360° Assessments

Pros	Cons
 Provide opinions of co-workers at all levels—not just from above	 Require 2 – 3 weeks to complete
 Allow subjects to know how many others see him/her	 Respondents may be skeptical of confidentiality/slow to respond
 Have the credibility of many people's opinions—not just that of one person	 Measurable performance improvement cannot be documented
 Allow comments that can provide nuances and insights	 Complex and labor-intensive to administer (many forms, many people involved, etc.)
	 Negative ratings/remarks are not often given (everyone knows they'll be rated themselves)
	 Require training of respondents to complete forms sufficiently well
	 May negatively alter the way managers manage—instead of doing what's right for the business, they do what will get them good reviews

Training Needs Assessment (continued ...)

Pre-Training Tests

Pros	Cons
↑ Clearly tie to desired performance standards	↓ Assess only the issues written on it
↑ Provide a baseline to assess training effectiveness when combined with a post-training test	↓ Design of questions can bias results
↑ Minimize subjectivity in assessing performance	↓ Some people don't do well on "tests" and this can give misleading results
↑ Focus on one topic/performance area at a time	↓ Don't describe actual behavioral skills
↑ Can be administered relatively easily	

Since she had only a few weeks to develop and deliver the course, she decided to use pre-training tests to get measurable data about the target group's knowledge and to supplement it with:

- A brief e-mail survey of the target group and their managers about what they want from training
- A brief telephone survey of managers to get examples of behaviors to address
- A brief review of the operational metrics for the target group

She was able to get all of this within one week and develop learning objectives for the training. Based on this, she had a high level of confidence the training would be well-targeted to produce measurable and observable skill improvement.

All assessment methods have pros and cons and these can vary by organization. This training pro made a balanced judgment of the kind of training needs assessments that fit her organization, her time frame, her budget, her resources and her training goals. Effective training needs assessments could be worthwhile because they provide you and your organization:

- A systematic way of identifying specific and broader performance gaps
- A guide to determine if training is the right management intervention to achieve the performance improvements needed
- A basis for designing and delivering highly targeted training to achieve specific outcomes
- A means to document training effectiveness in measurable or observable terms
- A basis for projecting future training needs and for planning how to fulfill them

Ultimately, training can only be justified in business if it produces recognizable results that are valued by the business's owners, managers, employees and customers together. Applying effective needs assessment methods will ensure that all of your training programs will meet this test.