

TRAINING NEED ASSESSMENT : A CRITICAL STUDY

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TRAINING NEED ASSESSMENT

Meeting the many requirements of clients, fellow associates and society has become a requirement for organizational success (Popcorn, 1991; Kaufman, 1998). In response of this increasing demand of both internal and external clients "need assessments" have become a mainstay in organizational management of recent years. With a history that can be traced in part back to 1952 (Moore and Dutton, 1978), the needs assessment process has become integral part of many organizations. Private and public sector organizations alike are making great strides at identifying and prioritizing performance problems, intervention requests and/or resource requirement as well possible organizational contributes. Training needs assessment is recognized as the first step in any Human Resource Development intervention (Leigh, et al., 2000). However, Desimone, et al., (2002) contested that in analysing HRD needs, four levels of needs has to be analysed. They include assessing the needs of the organisation, individual employees' skills, knowledge and attitudes, and their functional responsibilities as well as departments' needs.

A Needs Assessment is a systematic exploration of the way things are and the way they should be. These "things" are usually associated with organizational and/or individual performance (Stout, 1995).

A needs assessment should be designed to identify and prioritize needs, while a need analysis should break and identified need into its component parts and determine solution requirement (Watkins and Kaufman, 1996). Practical and pragmatic needs assessments provide a process for identifying and prioritizing gaps between current and desired results (Kaufman, 1998, Kaufman et al, 1993; Watkins and Kaufman, 1996).

Need Assessment is defined as an investigation, undertaken to determine the nature of performance problems in order to establish the underlying causes and the way in training can address this (Erasmus et al, 2000). Goldstein (1993) describes need assessment as the phase of the instructional process that provides the information necessary to design the entire programme. A training gap is defined as the difference between the required standard of the job

and incumbent's performance. Need identification is the starting point in any training and development activity. Need identification or assessment is not a routine function, because it should conduct carefully and in a diagnostic manner (Al-Kharyat & Elgamal, 1997).

The assessment begins with a "need" which can be identified in several ways but is generally described as a gap between what is currently in place and what is needed, now and in the future (Miller et al, 2002). The purpose of a training needs assessment is to identify performance requirements or needs within an organization in order to help direct resources to the areas of greatest need, those that closely relate to fulfilling the organizational goals and objectives, improving productivity and providing quality products and services.

Indeed, there are various reasons why needs assessment is not conducted as it is described as being a difficult process, time consuming and lack of resources in carrying out the tasks (Hill, 2004). On the other hand, Desimone, et al., (2002) argued that incorrect assumptions are usually made about needs analysis being unnecessary because the available information already specifies what an organisation's needs are. Furthermore, it was contested that there is a lack of support for needs assessments as HRD professionals are unable to convince top management of its necessity (Reid and Barrington, 1994).

According to Miller et al (2002) the needs assessment is the first step in the establishment of a training and development Program. It is used as the foundation for determining instructional objectives, the selection and design of instructional programs, the implementation of the programs and the evaluation of the training provided. These processes form a continuous cycle which always begins with a needs assessment.

The ultimate aim of the need analysis is to establish: 1) what needs actually exist; 2) whether they are important; 3) how the need become apparent; 4) how they were defined; 5) how they may best be addressed and 6) what the priorities are (Erasmus et al, 2000).

Any thorough need assessment phase must address three key areas: the organization, the job and the individual. Organizational assessment considers the proposed training within the context of the rest of the organization. An important consideration is whether or not the proposed training will compatible with the organization's mission,

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strategy, goals and culture (Erasmus et al, 2000; Goldstein, 1993; Van Dyk et al, 1997).

Gould et al (2004) Training needs analysis is the initial step in a cyclical process which contributes to the overall training and educational strategy of staff in an organization or a professional group. The cycle commences with a systematic consultation to identify the learning needs of the population considered, followed by course planning, delivery and evaluation.

The second crucial aspect of need analysis is the job and its concomitant duties and responsibilities. This is called task analysis and different methods such as; the critical incident methods are used. Once the duties or task in which training is needed are identified, the detailed analysis of each task may begin. The purpose of this step is to ascertain if the task is important and if training is essential and then to determine the procedure that should be taught. It is important to determine which employees should receive training and what their current levels of skill and knowledge are (Erasmus et al, 2000; Van Dyk et al, 1997).

The assessment perspective (applied conducting a need assessment) attends to the harvesting of data to identify the gaps between current results and required / desired results and the place those needs in priority order on the basis of the costs to meet the need compared to the cost to ignore them (Kaufman, 2000; Kaufman, et al 2001).

The final purpose of need analysis is to identify the criteria to be used in judging how proposed interventions will yield pay-off. In the business impact ISD model it is critical for the design team to agree up front about criteria for success. Benefits are the returns attributable to those investments. The designer should identify measurement and ensure that those factors are measured during subsequent phases of the project (Molenda et al 1996).

According to Molenda et al (1996) the seeds for ultimate acceptance and use of the solution are planned at the beginning of the phase. The goal is to identify key people, think about how the solution to the problem will affect each of them and start to pursue their buy-in. According to Van Dyk et al (1996) the purpose of a strategy or a plan of action is to establish needs, regardless of the level or type of needs assessment to be undertaken. Rouda and Mitchell (1995) identify priorities and importance of possible activities.

Once the need analysis has been completed, the needs that were identified are translated into measurable objectives that can guide the training process. Training objectives should focus on the behaviour component, which describes in clear terms what a learner has to do to demonstrate that he or she has in fact learned. Behavioural training objectives state what the person will be able to do, under what conditions and how well he or she will be able to do it (Erasmus et al, 2000; Van Dyk et al, 1997; Molenda et al 1996).

Levels of Training Need

Need assessments offer performance improvement initiatives as unique opportunities to approach performance improvement from a variety of assessment level: individual, organizational and/or societal level. Conventional "business wisdom" usually only defines two levels or organizational planning and decision-making: organizational (macro) and individual/ small group (micro). Kaufman (1997) suggests that this limited frame-of-reference has kept business focused on a "conventional bottom line". But a new paradigm of societal value-added has emerged (Popcorn, 1990; Drucker, 1973; Kaufman, 1998) and with it a "societal bottom line" as well as societal (mega) level of planning and decision making.

Van Dyk et al (1997) refer to three levels of training needs: Macro (need of national and even international interest), Meso (organization's specific requirement) and Micro level (only one person's or a small population's need).

Mathews, et al (2001) training needs assessment is dominated by senior management decision and supervisors' opinions. The skills inventory is the most widely applied formal technique. Organizations tend to pay more attention to customers and work groups when defining training needs. In general, objective and formal methods should be adopted more widely (e.g. training audits).

Models of Training Need Assessment

Needs assessment models vary in their focus on the results to be achieved and/or the processes assumed to achieve results: difference of "doing the right things" versus "doing things right" as suggested by Drucker (1973).

Newstrom and Lilyquist (1979) developed a contingency model to evaluate various needs assessment methods. They evaluated twelve methods on the basis of five selected criteria: Employee involvement; Management involvement; Time required; Costs; and Relevant quantifiable data. Newstrom and Lilyquist (1979) recommended that weaknesses in one method could be balanced by including other complementary methods and that trainers needed to weigh the criteria in terms of their importance to the organisation.

Graham and Mihal (1986) offer readers an alternate model for developing a needs assessment that uses a surveying approach that is less likely to be biased by the perceptions of managers. They use the implications of this to recommend a four-step survey process :i) manager determine the task related to their work ii) managers identify which tasks they believe their performance could be improved upon iii) managers prioritize development desires and iv) superiors then validate the development desires of their managers. This alternative to conventional surveying,

though limited if used as exclusive data collection method, can be useful during development of need assessment.

Rossett (1987) perhaps one of the most widely used training requirement analysis models currently in use by business and industry, Rossett's reactive model seeks to lessen the gap between "optimal" and "actual" individual and small-group performance.

Burton and Merrill (1988) proposed four-phase model for need assessment which is applicable for practitioner in a variety of disciplines and recognizes both internal and external clients. This model focuses on "the application of needs assessment in the development of instructional materials at the level of a course". Burton and Merrill's model uses instructional goals rather than measurable performance objectives.

Caffarella (1988) used the Newstrom and Lilyquist model to evaluate eight selected methods. She described the eight methods (Observation, Survey, Interview, Group Meeting, Job Analysis, Tests, Critical Incident & Written Material) she had chosen as those most widely in use, selected from major sources on data collection methods (Knowles, 1980; Steadman, 1980 and Tracey, 1984).

Murk and Wells (1988) the Systems Approach Model (SAM) functions as broad model of instructional design rather than being solely dedicated to needs assessment. This nonlinear model includes needs assessment as an important component. The needs assessment process described functions though as a learner analysis to be used to identify necessary entry skills to training programmes.

Ostroff and Ford (1989) their model is one of the several models for need assessment derived from McGehee and Thayer's (1961) text *Training in Business and Industry*. This text proposes that training requirements are analyzed according to three content areas: organizational, task and person. Ostroff and Ford expand this framework by including a "levels" dimension (consisting of organizational, sub-unit and individual) as well as an "application" dimension.

Rummler and Brache (1990) the Relationship Map is a proposed improvement to the organizational maps in many fields. The major contribution of the Relationship Map is the provision of a horizontal systems perspective, which includes recognition of internal and external clients, output delivered to customers outside the organization and the flow of work that transform inputs to products and outputs.

Darraugh (1991) the six-step model for needs assessment appears to parallel Rossetts's (1987) Training Needs Assessment Model in its determination of actuals, optimal, attitudes and cause.

Nowack (1991) his model for needs analysis differentiates between training "needs and wants" based on

their importance to the job-task and the requirement for increased employee proficiency. The Nowack model has nine steps beginning with a job profile and focusing on questionnaire and focus-group data-collection methods. The model does not identify societal, organizational or individual results but rather focuses on organizational processes. Based on the information gathered in the early steps of the model, training objectives are developed and serve as perception-based evaluation criteria. The questionnaire should include two primary criteria: importance, which is relevance and frequency of the activities and behaviors of a specific job and proficiency, which is the competence of employees in performing their job.

Rothwell and Kazanas (1992) their model relies on the two main assumptions: first the author presuppose that intended results will necessarily follow from individual and small-group application of skills. Second, they assume that instructional goals possess the rigor necessary for decision making and will contribute to individual, small- group, organizational and societal consequences.

McClelland (1992) emphasizes that training may or not be appropriate solution for organizational problems. His "systems approach" offers many useful guidelines for making decisions regarding the use of outside consultants, selecting the appropriate needs assessment methodology, as well as administering the assessment.

Freeman (1993) addresses the topic of needs assessment within the context of how the process is related to long-range planning for human resources. The author suggests that this may involve looking beyond the office and into the community.

McClelland (1993) his second article provides practitioners with recommendations for conducting an assessment. He begins by differentiating assessments and surveys and suggests that surveys alone do not constitute a needs assessment. A prescription for implement an open-systems Training needs assessments (TNA) is provided. TNAs are a popular and valuable tool for the human-resource development professional in determining an organizations's skill, knowledge and talent base. At the same time it provides information on areas where training programs can be effectively implemented with greatest impact.

Cline and Seibert (1993) the planning phase involves identification of the possible usages of data; setting of criteria or goals; familiarization with the topic, task or focus through research, developing a guidance group. The data-collection phase, on the other hand, requires interviews, group discussion and gathering of hard data. The last stage is the data-analysis phase. This involves data compilation, statistical analysis and preparation of a report.

Gordon (1994) approaches needs assessment as an analysis activity, and does not so much identify and document gaps in results as discussion inputs and processes that the organization can employ when prescribing training and non-training solutions to its internal clients. The Front-End Analysis Model rolls down from desired individual results, though it does not formally address desired small group, organizational or societal results. Instead it acts to identify resources unavailability and/or faulty processes for shortcoming in individual performance.

Johnson (1996) acknowledges that his needs assessment model is focused on "training requirement planning" and does not address the identification of performance problems that are likely candidates for training solution. Johnson does offer several guidelines for determining the role of training within an organization. First identify customer demands and then determine the current level of knowledge of employees. Management support for training is another crucial factor in ensuring success.

McArdle (1996) differentiates between two types of needs assessments. The first type, problem analysis, "identifies a problem and offer solutions". The second, a competency model, considers the "available opportunities by identifying and acquiring new skills and abilities or competencies". To determine which type of needs assessment suits their organizations, manager should record the current work situation, clarify the objectives of the whole exercise and seek management support.

Kaufman (1998) Organizational Element Model (OEM) is the only needs assessment framework reviewed that formally address the linkage between every result focus (societal, organizational, small-group and individual). OEM framework suggests that a need assessment begin with a focus on societal results and roll-down to organizational and individual or small-group results. OEM is a dynamic template that can be used to identify the impact of organizational action at all levels of results. Kaufman's outside-in approach to planning and inside-out approach to implementation yield finding that may be applied to data-based decisionmaking.

Barriers to Training Need Assessment

Fairbairns (1991) suggests that many needs analysis technique fail to produce reliable information. She identifies two questions common to many needs analysis i) what skills, knowledge and/or personal attributes are important in your job and ii) in what skills, knowledge and/or personal attributes are you in "need" of training.

Wright and Geroy (1992) like other articles highlighting the limitations of the training need assessment, they noted that "between 80% and 90% of the productivity improvement can be found in the work environment or

cultures" and thus a "need-analysis-tied-exclusively-to-training" is often ineffective. A needs assessment model utilized in their research with the Ontario Skills Programme, they additionally make suggestions for the selection of a needs assessment model.

Abdullah (2009) suggested that absence of needs assessment and analysis is due to lack of expertise and it is irrespective of the size of firms. Other inhibiting factors mentioned by the organisations sampled include high employee turnover, the absence of a clear HRD plan and policy and the absence of a separate unit or section to handle employees' training and development. Manufacturing companies in Malaysia often had forsaken the medium and long term HRD needs and objectives.

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