Identifying Your Organizations Training Needs

7-Steps Process

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Assessment and Measurement Methods

An overall organizational training needs assessment should be a very comprehensive examination of what is currently being trained, what knowledge, skills, and abilities should be added to the education program, and what may need to be added in the future. Areas of assessment and assessment methods can differ from subject to subject within the organization, and most certainly differ between organizations themselves. Before we begin a discussion of various assessment areas of which to be aware, let's explore the definition of needs as well as some of the methods used in training needs assessment.

You can easily categorize your organization's needs into a few areas. First, a felt or perceived need is an overall desire for improvement in a certain subject area. For example, management may point out that customer service complaints have risen. There may not be a direct link to the training program, but the identification of a rise in complaints is a perceived need. Next, comparative needs are those needs that are discovered by comparing the training audience to a set of criteria, either internal or external. For example, hard-number production reports may tell you that a certain target audience is not meeting its goals. Third, an identified need occurs in response to a failure of some type, such as not meeting sales goals for a set time period. Identified needs can also be so-called "critical incident" needs, which occur because of a catastrophic failure such as a factory explosion, a regulatory infraction, or even a natural disaster. The final needs category is future or anticipated needs, which are obviously needs that will occur based on organizational changes, such as new products, new services, or mergers and acquisitions.

Although this is a very simple view of the needs you may encounter, it serves as a starting point for your overall needs analysis.

You may also want to further separate the areas of need within the categories. For example, needs can be based on current training, that is, if current training is not meeting the mark then it will probably need to be rewritten. Needs can also be related to tasks or jobs. For example, ff an identified or critical incident need appears, it may be because of gaps in job or task performance, which may point to training gaps. Keep in mind that many of the needs we will discuss in this series can also be related to issues other than training, such as management, work environment, or even market or industry forces. With that in mind, your organization's needs may be related to development in areas such as leadership, career progression, management, or human resources. And if your organization is heavily regulated, its needs may be recurring or required, such as training for regulatory compliance and legal issues.

Needs assessment and analysis methods vary widely based on the organization, its goals, the timeline for the intervention, and even staffing and budget. One of the most common needs assessment tools is a survey, either written or online. You can administer surveys to employees, managers, customers, and executives, and these surveys can give you an overall view of the needs (and types of needs) that currently exist. Another common assessment tool is job or task analysis, in which you may observe a job being performed and compare it to job descriptions, manager description, and even the expected output of the job or task. Many times a job analysis points directly to areas where the performer has a lack of knowledge or a low confidence level in the task.

Competency identification is another way to assess needs, especially if you are starting from scratch. For example, you may be charged with creating a comprehensive training program for an entire department or family of jobs where no training currently exists. In this situation, stakeholders, managers, and the people who perform the work can be asked to identify competency areas and the skills that fall under those competencies. For example, customer service representatives may have competency areas related to overcoming objections, closing the sale, and making appropriate referrals. Finally, operational measurements are great tools for needs assessment. These measurements may be goals, reports, or other data that point to skills gaps. Many times, an operational measurement may be the most concrete identification of a training need.

Now that we have explored general needs categories and measurement methods, we can move on to specific needs areas.

Existing Training

Before you begin assessing various organizational areas for training needs, it's a good idea to start with training that already exists. Existing training can be centralized, that is, run by the training and development department. On the other hand, individual departments may have training programs going on at those levels, as well. These programs can be well known, or perhaps they may be "covert". For example, some departments may have an on-the-job training program that may be as simple as a first day or first week checklist. The idea behind the determination of existing training is not to expose any kind of "secret" training, but to determine how training can be made more effective.

Existing training programs that are part of the training and development department are most likely the easiest place to start. Your programs probably have evaluations attached to them, such as level-one participant evaluations. In addition, you may also have evaluations that occur further down the road and cover both participants and their managers. Whatever the situation, go back at least three months to look at the evaluations and determine the state of the courses. If you haven't been doing this on a regular basis, you may be surprised by what you find. If things aren't going as well as you expected, place the courses in the overall assessment as needs.

When it comes to discovering training at departmental levels, you may need to use some diplomacy, or at least your internal network. Find out who has training, what kind of training it is, and how it's going. While you're conducting this fact-finding, stress that the motive is not to expose any kind of "skunk work" training, but to see if the training and development organization can help make the programs effective and possibly take them to other audiences. After all, if something is going on "under the radar" but is extremely effective, doesn't it stand to benefit the organization, either in its current or a modified format?

Next, determine the framework for the needs assessment in relation to existing programs. What is the scope of changes required? For example, a simple departmental checklist could become a full-blown on boarding course that reaches across various levels of the organization. Or, it may be something that can stay within its individual department. Also, look closely at the current delivery method. Can anything that currently exists in a classroom format be converted to a blended or online format? Consider this question in the opposite form: are blended, online, or classroom courses wasting time that could be spent on-the-job with a checklist and daily coaching sessions? Another aspect to consider is whether existing training programs should be discontinued altogether in order to make room for new or improved programs? These are difficult questions to answer, but in order to begin your organizational assessment on strong footing they are necessary.

After you've determined the state of existing training, think about the timeline and staffing necessary to complete the changes. In some cases, you may have the staffing in place to start changes that are going to be a necessary part of the outcome of the overall assessment. On the other hand, you may not have the time or staff to start. In this case, it may be a good idea to hold off on any changes pending the results of the entire assessment. This way, you can get a good picture of the changes that need to be made, as well as the additions that will have to be made as part of the overall assessment.

As you are examining existing training needs, start to think about how you'll measure effectiveness of programs that are rewritten or redesigned. Level one surveys are always a good idea, but don't stop there. You may want to add evaluations of both participants and managers at intervals after the training in order to examine effectiveness. Plus, your stakeholders may be able to identify concrete measurements, such as operational reports, sales goals, customer complaint incidences, and regulatory evaluations. And remember that all of these evaluation suggestions will work for any of the types of needs we will discuss in the remainder of this series.

Now that we have examined existing training programs, let's move into specific needs areas, starting with job, task, and industry-related training needs.

Industry, Job, and Task-Related Needs

When you begin your organizational needs assessment, you'll find that many of the needs you discover are related to the overall industry and the jobs within the organization. This information can certainly overload you if you are looking at the organization's training needs as whole. So the best way to tackle these needs is to break them down based on industry, job, and task. Let's define each area and then look at some of the best ways to assess needs in those areas.

First, industry related needs are fairly simple but can be hard to narrow down for your training program. Are there certain pieces of industry knowledge that employees should have, both as a whole and by department? If so, this type of knowledge is sometimes based on the premise that people should know how they fit into the big picture, both at the organizational and industry levels. The need for this knowledge may also stem from the need to understand how the organization itself fits into the overall industry. For example, a manufacturing group that creates parts for commercial airliners may need to know where those parts go, what airplanes they end up on, and how those airplanes and the company that builds them affect the industry itself. When you are looking at industry-related knowledge, remember to keep it to the "need to know" information, versus the "nice to know". If you have both, you'll end up swamping your audiences with knowledge that does not apply directly to them.

Next, job related needs are self-explanatory: they relate directly to the jobs within the organization. One of the best ways to look for job-related needs is to determine if training exists for certain jobs or job families. If not, you may have to create "A to Z" training for a job. We will discuss assessment methods in a moment, but remember that the purpose of job-related needs assessment is to determine the final outputs of the job itself, whether it is a completed call with a customer or the production of a 100% error-free commercial airliner part. The key to job-related needs is to determine what can be taught as part of a training program, what aspects of the job belong to management, and what aspects of the job may be related to coaching or on-the-job learning.

A task related need is usually a particular part or output within a job or job family. Think about your job: there are many different tasks and processes that come together to create your job on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. Every job is similar in that aspect. For example, customer service reps may be performing at very high levels in customer satisfaction and sales, but they are having trouble inputting data into the CRM system. This problem may be causing issues with customer contact, the customer's next logical product, and even recording closed sales. This particular part of the job, or task, should be analyzed to determine where the breakdown occurs. Many times task-related needs occur inside a job or job family where training currently exists - it just may be one of those areas that need to be revamped in order to be more effective.

Let's briefly examine some of the assessment methods that can help you find needs in these areas quickly and effectively. To begin with, a stakeholder or executive may simply express a perceived industry-related need. For example, the aircraft parts manufacturing CEO may simply decide that all employees need to know how the organization fits into the overall picture. Many times this type of expression may be a bit stronger than a "suggestion" and simply needs to be included in the training program.

When it comes to job related needs, observation and survey may be very effective. For example, if no training currently exists for the customer service reps, you may want to observe them doing their jobs for a few days to determine the tasks within those jobs. In addition, you may want to survey managers and stakeholders to determine what the final output of the jobs should be, such as a certain score on the customer satisfaction survey. However you assess for job-related needs, you may end up at the task level anyway.

At the task level, a process known as task analysis may be the most helpful. In a task analysis, you take your observations of the person doing the job and then break them down into the task areas. For each area, you can determine the individual tasks, such as then determine its frequency. From there, you can determine which tasks have more importance by their frequency as well as which tasks will require more detailed knowledge. Finally, you can determine if adequate training exists on each task and task area.

Next, we will look at career development related needs.

Career Development

Career development training needs typically fall outside of the black-and-white specifics of a particular job or job family. Or, they can be related to one job family such as managers and supervisors. Career development needs can be soft skills, skills that are needed to move to the next logical job or job family, or skills that may be needed to move to the next logical horizontal job or job family. Let's look at each skill area and then discuss how you can best assess those needs.

Soft skills can be located both within a job and outside of a job. For example, customer service skills may almost certainly be required of customer service reps who face the customer population. But what about "back office" employees who never face customers but have their own internal customers? What about the overall customer service philosophy of the organization? Does this knowledge need to be imparted to all employees at all levels? The overall philosophy also leads to areas such as the organization's mission, values, and overall goals. These types of skills and knowledge can be considered to be part of the overall career development plan for all employees. Soft skills can also include human resources, such as policies and organizational HR philosophy. Consider how all of these pieces of knowledge fit together: this could be your organization's new-hire orientation program that goes out to all employees. Nonetheless, it should be part of the career development portion of your needs assessment.

Next logical job or job family skills can also fall outside of a particular job or task. For example, the organization may want an advanced customer relations and negotiation course to be required for anyone wishing to progress from customer service level 1 to customer service level 2. Next logical career level skills can also take the form of management knowledge to prepare a person for a supervisory position. These needs can be in areas such as interviewing, hiring, corrective action, payroll, etc. The overall key of next logical level assessment is that you should look at what may be missing from the job or task related level and add it to the training plan. This way, as a person plateaus in his or her job level, he or she can begin taking courses that apply to the next job.

Horizontal mobility may also be a part of career development related needs. For example, your organization may hire most of its population into the first level jobs, such as customer service. After time and proof of ability, the organization may begin to look for candidates who exhibit skills and interest in other areas, such as IT, human resources, or even training. If there is an established "track", i.e. IT looks for its entry-level technicians in the customer service rep population, then training should be offered for those people. This doesn't even have to be in house training - the IT management may point out the basic certifications they want a person to have, interview that person, and then pay for his or her certification. The point here is to include needs assessment for established or logical horizontal movement that makes someone in the organization mobile. Keep in mind that this possibility of mobility may even assist in retention. It's easier to keep someone if they know that the organization is concerned about their future.

Assessing for these areas may be a little more complicated than job or task related needs assessment. One of the first places to start is a simple conversation with department or program managers. For example, some organizations have a customer relations program manager. This person can be very helpful in identifying career development needs that should go to all associates regardless of their position within the organization. Managers, such as the IT department managers, can help you determine what needs exist for horizontal mobility between departments. In addition, stakeholders such as human resources can be valuable in determining career development needs. And you may not even need to create elaborate surveys to conduct this type of assessments. Many times the needs are clear after a conversation with one of these managers or stakeholders.

Next, we will explore leadership, talent management, and succession planning needs.

Leadership, Talent Management, and Succession Planning Needs

As you are assessing your organization's training needs, don't forget about leadership, talent management, and succession planning. It's true that you've probably identified some leadership and management training needs in the other areas of assessment. But remember that an organization is most likely going to need training that is specifically for the purpose of retaining talent, building a leadership pool, and ensuring that skills exist to cope with loss of leadership, whether sudden or not. Obviously this area of skills and knowledge works hand-in-hand with career development and job-related training to form a full development complement for the population. Let's examine these areas and then discuss assessment methods.

It's important to maintain the distinction between management and leadership training while you are conducting an overall needs assessment. You've already identified management needs, such as hiring processes or corrective action procedures. But these are functions and not attitudes and abilities. This is where the leadership needs assessment picks up - and keep in mind that leadership training and development can occur at all levels of the organization, not just at the management or supervisory level.

One of the first parts of a needs assessment in relation to leadership is to identify the leadership competencies that exist within the organization. Further, attempt to define a leader in terms of your organization. Of course there are general leadership competencies and definitions, but the task of the needs assessment is to choose those competencies and definitions and modify them to fit the organization's culture. After "the leader" is defined, the needs assessment should go deeper into identifying the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that exist within each of the chosen competencies. This also includes defining levels of leadership within the knowledge base, that is, entry-level versus management level.

Talent management training needs are those that can help managers and supervisors manage the talent that comes out of leadership training. For example, are managers currently prepared to assess their teams for leadership potential, coach them, and prepare them for a future leadership role? Does the manager and supervisor group have the ability to identify a person's strengths and coach those while at the same time developing opportunities? Is there a section of the HRIS system that is specifically developed for talent management? Again, you may have identified some of these needs as you moved through management and leadership. The question is: do they belong in those areas or should they be part of an overall talent management "school" or broad-based competency area?

Succession planning needs border directly on talent management and leadership, and may even be a part of those needs assessment areas. What is the organization's philosophy on succession planning? For example, does the organization believe in both high-professional and high-potential leadership? What is the process for creating a succession plan? Do managers and supervisors need special skills or training in order to create that plan? These are all questions that you should ask during your leadership, talent management, and succession planning needs assessment.

But what are some good ways to conduct the needs assessment for this area? As you would imagine, this is a somewhat special situation. One way to assess in these areas is to gather the current leadership team or pool and lead them through a brainstorming session. Have this group identify the organization's leadership competencies and also identify (at a high level) the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that fall under each of the competencies. During this needs assessment session, consider using whiteboards or flip charts around the room, which will provide a visual picture of the training needs as they are being built. In fact, you may see a training program begin to emerge during the brainstorming session. In terms of talent management and succession planning, one of the best ways to assess is through survey. Ask managers if they feel comfortable identifying the talent in their areas. Find out if they feel able to identify strengths and coach opportunities for the potential talent. If there is the slightest bit of hesitation, the manager and supervisor group may be able to help you identify their biggest training needs.

Next, we will explore the assessment of required and recurring training needs.

Recurring and Required Training Needs

While you are conducting an overall needs assessment, you may find that certain training needs must be repeated, while some of them are requirements of a job or a job family. In fact, you may have already uncovered some of these needs as you delved into the areas of job and task related training. But it's a good idea to categorize these needs separately so that they can be integrated into the overall training plan on a regular or required basis. For the purposes of this discussion, let's work with training needs in the following categories: recurring, required, and both recurring and required.

First, what is a recurring training need? Typically, a recurring training need is a set of knowledge, skills, or abilities that the organization wants its associates to repeat on a regular basis, usually annually. This type of training could be a products and services certification, a customer service or customer relations training program, or even an annual industry update. Recurring pieces usually serve to put everyone on the same footing in terms of knowledge and ability in that particular group of competencies.

Required training can fall under the same category, that is, a group of competencies that the organization requires. But required training by itself is usually a one-time offering, such as a new product rollout, new service standards, or training for mergers and acquisitions. On the other hand, a regulating body or agency can levy training in many different areas, and require that the organization certify its results. For example, financial service providers may be required to provide and certify training related to the latest overhaul of that industry. In some areas, organizational associates may be required to take training when they first come into a job. For example, new-hire flight attendants are required by the FAA to take and pass a comprehensive safety course based upon the airline's aircraft, rules regarding passenger safety, and even first aid. You may have discovered some required needs in your job and task analysis, but be sure to make the distinction between those needs that are required by a regulating agency and those that are not.

Recurring and required training is a combination of both types of needs, i.e. competency areas that are required by either the organization or a regulating body and are given on a regular basis. For example, flight attendants are required to take training and be certified on safety features on an annual basis in order to maintain employment. This is also an FAA requirement. In financial services, certain employees are required to take and pass regulatory training every year - and the organization must certify its results within a given time period.

Assessing these needs can be difficult, because you may uncover bits and pieces of them within your job and task assessments. For example, certain parts of person's job may be related to a particular regulation or group of regulations. But in regard to training needs that are required by a regulating agency and may be recurring, the best place to start is with the organization's legal counsel or legal department. In many cases, you may not need to conduct a "formal" needs assessment - a series of conversations may help you uncover the need. And most likely, the legal department has already organized a listing of required training components. If that is not the case, there are usually legal experts within the various departments of an organization and they should not be overlooked. In regard to organizationally required training needs, set up conversations with division executives and stakeholders in order to determine what pieces of knowledge they would like to see as requirements or recurring requirements. Again, it may be as simple as a conversation versus a formal needs assessment. Another way to reach for these training needs is to include this aspect in your job and task analysis that we've already discussed. Many times the employees themselves are the ones who will be able to tell you about the most important recurrent and required features of training.

Our next area, future and anticipated training needs, is the final area of needs assessment.

Future and Anticipated Training Needs

It is a given in training and development that your best-laid plans tend to change. But having an idea of the organization's future needs can at least prepare you for what might be coming. In fact, a future training needs assessment is probably something that should occur on a regular basis, even after you've initially assessed the organization. For example, you may want to assess for future or anticipated needs at the beginning of every calendar or fiscal year. Let's define future and anticipated training needs and then look at some ways to assess them.

Obviously future or anticipated training needs are those that will come with organizational or departmental changes in the future. To further define these types of needs, you may need to break them down into functional categories. Let's start with policy and procedure needs. The question here is: are any policies and procedures slated for a major change or overhaul any time in your future assessment period? For example, are customer service policies going to be made "tighter" or more stringent? Perhaps there is a new customer relations model planned that will change the entire customer handling procedure. Are processes slated to change because of a merger or acquisition? Or are processes going to change because of new rules and regulations? Answering these questions can at least point you in the right direction when it comes to future policy and procedure training needs.

A second area to look at is systems. Is the organization or an individual department planning to implement a new technical system? This could be your own LMS, an HRIS, a new customer relationship management system, or a new overall operating system such as Windows. In relation to system changes, are any existing systems scheduled for changes or upgrades? Some system changes are subtle enough to be a slight update to training, while other system changes can cause a pretty heavy chain reaction in multiple departments, at the same time affecting various policies and procedures.

A third area of assessment is organizational and departmental needs. We've already discussed the possibility of mergers and acquisitions, which is always a big training need. Will the merger or acquisition significantly change the way the organization does business? How will new employees be "on boarded" into the overall organization? As always with mergers and acquisitions, the "people" aspect should be something that is considered as part of a future training need. In other organizational areas, will the overall mission, goals, or organizational objective undergo a transformation at any point during your assessment period? If these key organizational measurements are going to change, training should attempt to share the changes, prepare the population for what the change means, and show them how to move forward.

Assessing future and anticipated needs can be tricky. Many times the departments involved are reluctant to "take the lid off" of their anticipated change. But, as with any training initiative, your job is to position yourself as a strategic partner and not a watchdog. For policy and procedure changes, a good way to start is to survey the department that writes or creates those P&P's. You can conduct this formally, that is, through written or online survey, or informally by simply scheduling brainstorming sessions at the right time. From these surveys or conversations, you may get an idea of the changes that will require new or upgraded training. You should also survey overall division heads and stakeholders to determine what their plans are for the future time period. In fact, a written survey can be a starting point, and then when you review your results schedule meetings to sit down and talk with those key people. As you will discover, system change information can come from both the P&P groups and the department heads. Once you know about a system change, consider having a conversation with the IT department to determine how those changes are going to affect existing or planned training.

As with any of your needs assessment areas, plot the results from a future and anticipated needs assessment into the overall developing training plan. You'll find that certain needs can be placed further out in the timeline, while others may need to be pulled closer to the present time. Once you have assessed needs in all of the areas we have discussed in this series, you'll soon be able to develop an overall training plan and feel certain that the major needs have been uncovered and identified.

Bryant Nielson – Strategic Alliance & Acquisitions Director at Financial Training Solutions a division of CapitalWave Inc – offers 20+ years of training and talent management for executives, business owners, and top performing sales executives in taking the leap from the ordinary to extraordinary. Bryant is a trainer, business & leadership coach, and strategic planner for many sales organizations. Bryant's 27 year business career has been based on his results-oriented style of empowering.

CapitalWave Inc.
Training Solutions for the Financial and Human Markets

Financial Training Solutions (FTS), the instructor-led division of CapitalWave Inc, is a firm made of up industry professionals having a reputation for providing first-rate training and consultancy to banks and other financial institutions. FTS offers professionals who have extensive knowledge, experience and expertise in the areas of banking and finance.

Blended learning is the philosophy on which the company was founded. Our training methodology, integrating theory with practice using our own very powerful training tools, creates a uniquely exciting and effective learning environment. The result pays immediate dividends in the retention of newly-learned concepts and their practical application in the financial marketplace.

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