

Who Needs What Training?

A Look Askance at Needs Assessment

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The question serving as the title of this brief paper can be answered in several ways; most imply some kind of diagnosis.

Some people need training because it is known (or safely assumed) that they lack particular knowledge or skills. In many situations, for example, it is a good bet that newly hired salespeople lack knowledge of the products sold by the company hiring them. It is not as good a bet that these same new hires are lacking in basic selling skills. Nor, in the case of commodity-like products, is it a good bet that they lack basic product knowledge. A person selling PCs at SEARS, for instance, probably won't have much trouble making the transition to a Radio Shack store. It is also reasonable to assume that the introduction of a new system carries with it a requirement to train the users, especially if its functions are new or represent a radical departure from previous systems. It is not as reasonable to assume that a person skilled at using Lotus 1-2-3 will require extensive training before being able to use Microsoft Excel.

In any case, many training offerings are intended to remedy known or reasonably assumed skill or knowledge deficiencies. Unfortunately, much of this kind of training is developed or purchased and then delivered without any attempt being made to define the expected outcomes or benefits of the training. In short, a great deal of training is offered without the benefit of any diagnosis.

The method of choice for determining who needs what training is usually called "training needs assessment" or just plain "needs assessment." The purveyors and professors of this methodology differ sharply among themselves about how best to conduct a needs assessment. They disagree even more sharply when it comes to defining what does or doesn't qualify as a needs assessment.

Some advocate an approach as simple as polling managers to see what training they think their employees need. Some take it one step further and ask the employees what training they think they need. An underlying and unstated assumption seems to be that the managers and/or the employees are capable of correctly determining who needs what training.

Others argue for an analytical approach that begins by defining unmet results. Gaps in results are then analyzed so as to determine causes and corrective measures. This approach leads to training only when it can be unequivocally demonstrated that training will have some kind of beneficial impact on the unmet results that mark the beginning of the effort.

Still others advocate some kind of internal-markets approach; that is, of responding to requests for training, regardless of the basis for the request. A variation on this approach is for trainers to take the initiative and regularly offer courses that address what seem to be hot topics according to the business press.

Finally, a small group of purists claims that no training should ever be developed or delivered unless it has been preceded by a solid needs assessment. Unfortunately, it is not clear just what constitutes a needs assessment. Nor is it clear that a needs assessment is necessarily beneficial or practical.

The polling approach suffers from a reliance on diagnosis by people who might not be capable of carrying out such a diagnosis. More important, as regards knowledge work, it is questionable if an external agent (be he a pollster or she an analyst) can validly and reliably identify where and how training might be of value. This is because knowledge work is marked by configured instead of prefigured responses and because it relies so heavily on the tacit knowledge of the performer. The consequence of an incorrect diagnosis, of course, is training developed and delivered to absolutely no effect.

The analytical approach can be time consuming and it, too, requires its own special skill set. Moreover, making the links between operational and/or financial results and human behavior and performance (which is essential if training is to be targeted on that basis) is what many might call a “non-trivial” task. Were these links so easily made, the ROI of training would cease to be an issue of concern.

The pollsters’ approach, then, is likely to be wide of the mark and the analysts’ approach is frequently impractical. Yet, training needs assessment is still considered *de rigueur*.

The interests of purveyors of needs assessment methodologies are clear to see: a requirement for needs assessment creates a demand for their products and services. Less clear, perhaps, is that purveyors of all needs assessment methodologies are all well served by disagreeing about how best to conduct a needs assessment. Disagreements serve to differentiate the various methodologies – and to keep all such methodologies from becoming mere commodities.

One inescapable fact is that there is no widespread agreement amongst the gurus, let alone the wider training establishment, regarding the right way of conducting a training needs assessment. Trainers, then, are pretty much left to fend for themselves when it comes to assessing the need for training.

In the last analysis, the needs assessment issue isn’t one of doctrine, that is, of adhering to this or that methodological approach. The issue is instead one of ensuring that the money and other resources expended on training represent a good use of those resources. Needs assessment, then, however it is carried out, should be looked upon as a tool to help make a defensible case for training expenditures.

The financial return from training is notoriously difficult to measure but, in some cases, it can be established. However, organizations are not just financial entities, they are also social, technical, and political entities, which is to say that the measure of organizational matters such as training is taken not just in terms of money, but also in terms of people, work, and power. Thus, the full measure of training includes people’s reactions to it; its effects on the work itself and, through these, on operational and financial results; and its perceived utility as a tool for helping to bring about change. In other words, to properly target training, one must first know the results it is expected to produce and how the achievement of those results will be evaluated.

Consider, for example, training in support of the introduction of a new product. How should that training be designed? The answer, of course, is that it depends. If the product is a long-awaited breakthrough product that the sales force is dying to sell, one set of design parameters is implied. If the product is viewed as a “dog,” an entirely different approach is called for. If the sales force is indifferent or ambivalent toward the new product, yet a third approach is called for.

Audience and outcomes, these are two of the more important factors that determine the design and delivery of training.

Ultimately, the beneficiaries of good investments in training are those who fund it, the customers or users of the training, those receiving the training and the training shop itself. If the training shop succeeds in delivering training that is perceived as valuable and, wherever possible, can be shown to be adding value to the business, the training shop will have achieved the enviable status of being seen as making a real contribution to the business.

Obviously, the money and other resources expended on training should not be squandered. On the other hand, the training department shouldn't get so caught up in doctrine that it loses sight of the very real political requirement to be viewed as responsive. Trainers would do well to keep in mind that training is only occasionally a solution to specific business or performance problems. On these occasions, a good needs assessment (or front-end analysis) is essential. However, training is also used to communicate information, introduce new ideas, and debate issues. Training can also be used to provide a shared experience as part of a team development effort. It is even the case that training can be used as a carrot (as incentive or as reward). Training, then, is more than a simple remedy for knowledge or skill deficiencies.

In all cases, trainers must know:

- the purposes the training is to serve (and whether or not training can serve those purposes),
- the nature of the audience for the training (so as to best position and present the training), and
- how to design and develop training using a wide range of methods and techniques (so as to engage the audience and achieve the purposes of the training).

These basic requirements hold true whether the training is stand-up classroom training or high-tech multi-media delivered via computer. Needs assessment, therefore, is not and cannot be some lock-step method or mindless procedure to be followed. It is more of an idea, a perspective, a philosophy. It is a broad set of concepts, tools, and techniques for getting at the reason for training, for defining the results one expects from training. As Roger Kaufman, one of the needs assessment gurus is fond of saying, "If training is the solution, what's the problem?" Needs assessment aims at answering that question, and answering it calls for a wide variety of imaginative and insightful approaches.

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