NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

The term "needs assessment" has come to represent a wide variety of types of assessment or analysis within the social sciences. Professionals in the health care field perform needs assessments to determine the types of health care needed by a particular community and how these needs might be prioritized; cities study the needs of residents to determine what services are required; transportation experts study human movements to ascertain public transportation needs; and the list goes on.

In the HRD field needs assessment first gained recognition as an essential step within the instructional design process. Program planners and developers generally have agreed that needs assessment is a crucial first step for any training or educational initiative to be successful. The focus of needs assessment in the last decade has evolved, although the mechanics of the process remain much the same. It is no longer viewed primarily as a step within the instructional design process, but rather as a broader analysis of performance problems and how they can be solved. This perspective has allowed HRD professionals to see needs assessment from a more holistic, systemic viewpoint. The information presented in this article refers primarily to needs assessment as used in the

human resources domain. Professionals from other fields, however, will note the similarity of the concepts and processes described here to those in other endeavors.

1. Introduction

1.1. Broad Definition

Within the human resources field, numerous definitions and models for needs assessment, each with subtle differences, have been proposed. For most researchers and practitioners, needs assessment is an investigative process with the purpose of connecting an organization's performance problems or opportunities for performance improvement to specific human performance interventions. Needs assessment thus also entails the process of distinguishing the components of performance problems that should be addressed by training from those that should be addressed by other interventions.

In simple terms, needs assessment is a systematic process for identifying gaps in performance and uncovering the causes of those gaps, or for identifying future performance needs. This interpretation is based on the concept of performance discrepancies or gaps -- the difference between a current level (what is) and a desired level (what should be).

Terms sometimes used synonymously include needs analysis, front-end analysis, and performance analysis. However, each of these terms also has been used to describe distinctly different processes, depending on the writer. Some professionals suggest a distinction between the terms "needs assessment" and "needs analysis." In this case, needs assessment often refers to a broader inquiry into organizational performance, while needs analysis designates a more narrowly focused analysis, such as that of a specific job classification. In this article the term "needs assessment" will be used to designate both general and more specific types of analysis.

1.2. Needs Assessment in an Instructional Context

A more specific type of needs assessment, the instructional, training or learning needs assessment, involves a need that can be addressed through some form of training or education. A training need exists when an employee lacks the knowledge or skill to perform an assigned task satisfactorily. One of the tasks of the needs assessor is to analyze the causes of a need and determine which come from lack of knowledge or skills and which may result from a lack of motivation or ability or some other non-instructional factor which requires having performance standards so that you can tell when a task is not performed satisfactorily. This often leads to task analysis to determine actual tasks performed and the level of accomplishment.

2. Major Theorists and Authors

A discussion of needs assessment would be incomplete without recognizing the underpinnings of current concepts and practices. Some contributors to the practice of

needs assessment include Thomas Gilbert, Roger Kaufman, Robert Mager, Joe Harless, Ron Zemke and Thomas Kramlinger.

Thomas Gilbert developed a model of human performance engineering. According to Gilbert, two main categories of factors affect human performance: environmental factors, including information, resources, and incentives; and individual factors, including knowledge, capacity, and motivation. By using these factors to analyze performance problems, one could determine the type of action needed to remedy the problem.

Over the years, Robert Mager has focused on performance problems and solutions to them. One of his earliest contributions included a simple flowchart to guide practitioners through the steps to identify and solve performance problems. In its most recent revision, the user responds to the following prompts to review a performance issue:

• What is the problem?
• Is it worth solving?
• Can we apply fast fixes?
• Are consequences appropriate?
• Do the individuals already know how to do the task(s)?
• Are there other clues to the problem?
• Select and implement solutions

Mager's model provides a systematic way to uncover the root causes of performance problems and select appropriate interventions.

In a similar vein, Joe Harless suggested that organizations tend to jump to solutions to problems before they have clearly defined a problem, much less analyzed the root causes. His response was a diagnostic "front-end analysis" to determine what performance and whose performance need to be influenced and what types of interventions should be used.

Since the mid-1970s Roger Kaufman has written extensively about needs assessment. He, too, has emphasized the criticality of needs assessment and the need to view performance improvement needs from a holistic perspective. He has helped clarify the underlying concepts and terminology of needs assessment.

3. What Are "Needs"?

When discussing the needs assessment process, the meaning of the term "need" must be defined. What one person views as a need, another may consider a want or desire. One way to approach the discussion of needs is to consider both "felt" and "actual" needs. Consider the following example. Numerous employees in a large company have expressed a need for stress management training. A deeper analysis, however, reveals factors within the work environment -- noise, inefficient work processes, and ineffective supervisory practices -- that induce stress. While the felt need may suggest training, the actual need may be to eliminate these stress factors. Regardless of the situation, the needs assessor must clearly determine in each case what the key stakeholders expect.

We should not ignore felt needs since they are often symptoms of deeper needs that must be addressed. We may choose to relieve some of these symptoms until we are able to solve the underlying problems. However, the needs assessment should help us identify root causes so that we are not constantly fixing the symptoms of problems.

Another issue to consider is the human tendency to perceive the problems and solutions we are most accustomed to dealing with. For example, a training professional may be more likely to interpret a performance problem as a training problem, while a psychologist may see the same performance problem as the result of individual personality problems which should be addressed through counseling. A well-planned needs assessment provides a more balanced analysis of the situation.

Sample Causes	Sample Solutions
Lack of skill and knowledge	Training, coaching, job aids
Flawed incentives	Review contracts, bonus plans, reward systems
Flawed environment	Work redesign, new/different tools, better match of people and jobs
Lack of motivation	Training to build success and confidence, job enrichment, flexible scheduling

Table 1: Examples of causes of performance problems and potential solutions

4. The Purpose of Needs Assessment

In the context of organizational performance, the needs assessment process provides direction and focus in the problem-solving process through identifying, documenting, and selecting appropriate problems. A comprehensive needs assessment provides a systematic way to plan strategically for improved performance. In simple terms, a human performance problem exists (1) when something is happening that should not be happening, or (2) when something is not happening that should be happening. The purpose of the needs assessment is to analyze these performance gaps so that they can be closed.

Within the human resource context, needs assessment is a crucial planning strategy. One of the main purposes of human resource planning is to ensure that the organization has enough people with the necessary knowledge, skills and motivation to accomplish the organization's strategic business plans. As a result, needs assessment is central to the HR planning process.

Within the training context, needs assessment provides a snapshot of the skills and knowledge of people in an organization. Training needs assessments can determine 1) levels of optimal performance and standards for excellence; 2) evidence of individuals' actual performance levels; 3) attitudes affecting performance; and 4) root causes of performance problems. By systematically analyzing training needs, we can identify solutions to performance problems that will provide the best return on training and development investments.

A number of inefficiencies are likely to occur when performance improvement initiatives are implemented without first performing a needs assessment. An organization may use a training program when other interventions might be more effective. Even if training is a logical solution, the organization may select the wrong objectives or put inappropriate emphases on them. Ultimately, people may be trained and sent back to their jobs without the necessary skills and knowledge.

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of needs assessment, the process is often skipped or cut short. Reasons cited include:

- Takes too much time;
- Costs too much money;
- Lack of people qualified to assess needs;
- Don't really want to know what's wrong;
- The findings might make someone look bad;
- Don't understand the strategic impact.

Whenever possible, conducting a needs assessment will actually help avoid wasted time, effort, and money.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Nancy Berger is an assistant professor and director of the Adult Education and Human Resource Development graduate programs at Virginia Commonwealth University. Prior to joining VCU, she was the president and owner of Training for Performance, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in the design, development, and implementation of both technical and management training and development programs. Her clients have included the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), Philip Morris, Nabisco, Markel Insurance, Tredegar Corporation, the Malaysian Institute of Management, and many others. She has also served as on-line professor with Capella University, as well as spending several years as an assistant professor of HRD at George Washington University. Her corporate experience has included designing e-learning and other training design at Cisco Systems, Inc., and 13 years at Dominion Virginia Power in various training design positions.

Dr. Berger has also served as a volunteer executive with the International Executive Service Corps, in Russia, and as a visiting professor at the Far East Academy of Economics and Management in Vladivostok, Russia and the ESCEM business school in Tours, France. She is the co-author of the book, *Leaders for the 21st Century*, published in English and Japanese.

Her professional preparation has included a PhD in Human Resource Development from Virginia Commonwealth University, a Masters in French from the University of Virginia, and a Graduate French Teaching Certificate from the Université de Nice, France.