2nd Edition

Needs Assessment BASICS

Beth McGoldrick and Deborah Tobey

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Contents

About the Training Basics Series

ATD's Training Basics series recognizes and, in some ways, celebrates the fast-paced, ever-changing reality of organizations today. Jobs, roles, and expectations change quickly. One day you might be a network administrator or a process line manager, and the next day you might be asked to train 50 employees in basic computer skills or to instruct line workers in quality processes.

Where do you turn for help? The ATD Training Basics series is designed to be your one-stop solution. The series takes a minimalist approach to your learning curve dilemma and presents only the information you need to be successful. Each book in the series guides you through key aspects of training: giving presentations, making the transition to the role of trainer, designing and delivering training, and evaluating training. The books in the series also include some advanced skills, such as performance and basic business proficiencies.

The ATD Training Basics series is the perfect tool for training and performance professionals looking for easy-to-understand materials that will prepare nontrainers to take on a training role. In addition, this series is the consummate reference tool for any trainer's bookshelf and a quick way to hone your existing skills.

Preface

It has been more than 10 years since the first edition of this book was written. In that time, the world has changed substantially. With the financial crisis starting in 2008 that continues to challenge organizations today, as well as outbreaks of war and terrorism, many organizations are hesitant to make additional investments in hiring more people, and thus are expecting more out of the people on their payrolls. Organizations need their current employees to be more efficient and more effective. This is where training and other HRD professionals can make a huge impact.

Over the past few years, training professionals have built inroads into helping organizations design, develop, and implement training programs that help organizations overcome knowledge and skill problems, successfully introduce new products into the marketplace, and help them succeed in doing more with less. However, there is still room to build a stronger relationship between training professionals and the organizations they work with through performance consulting.

What's New in This Edition?

In this second edition, you'll see:

- a greater emphasis on how a training professional can move from being a training order taker to being a valued performance consultant
- information on implementing a return on expectations (ROE) focus in which the client has expectations for the results of the training program, but doesn't want to pursue a return on investment (ROI) strategy
- a stronger link for human performance improvement (HPI) to help organizations with the systematic and systemic discovery of the root causes that prevent them from getting the results they desire.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is still designed for new or established training professionals—instructional designers, trainers, or training department managers—who want to make sure that their training programs meet the performance needs of their organizations. If you're reading this book, it's likely that your goals are to develop the foundation that will ensure the training programs you design and deliver will help the organization succeed.

How This Book Is Organized

To successfully assess training needs, you need to be able to identify the context for a training course request at four separate stages. You'll also have to identify the big picture of training needs throughout the organization. This book can help you do that. Here's a summary of the 10 chapters in *Needs Assessment Basics:*

Chapter 1, "Why Needs Assessment?" gives you an overview of the book. It focuses on the multiple purposes of needs assessment and serves as a foundational layer for the rest of the book.

Chapter 2, "The Training Request," shows you how to begin analyzing training needs within the most common framework encountered by trainers: receiving a training request from a client or manager in your organization. You will learn about the four stages of data collection required for thorough needs assessment and about the challenge of creating internal credibility so that you can conduct your needs assessment.

Chapter 3, "Identifying Questions and Data Sources," helps you identify questions that must be answered by the training needs assessment. You will also discover how to identify the sources that will provide the necessary data with the help of your business partners and client.

Chapter 4, "Evaluating Potential Data Collection Methods," offers guidance on how to choose data collection methods to answer the identified questions using the selected data sources. When comparing data collection methods, you must consider time and resource constraints, and realize that certain methods work best for certain information needs.

Chapter 5, "Data Collection Implementation," offers guidance in the ultimate choice of data collection methods and provides some tips and techniques for carrying out the data collection process.

Chapter 6, "Data Analysis," discusses what you discover—what the data tell you about the training need being investigated. One of the most important points is the fact that data are not the same things as recommendations.

Chapter 7, "Data Analysis Recommendations," demonstrates the difference between data and recommendations. Recommendations are the needs assessor's actual conclusions and suggested actions that she thinks should be carried out. The needs assessor's role in identifying issues that are unrelated to training is also examined.

Chapter 8, "Communicating With Your Client," presents communication techniques that can assist you in reaching your goal: the implementation of your recommendations to help the business improve. You will explore planning a presentation tailored to a specific client and stakeholders.

Chapter 9, "The Ideal Organization Scan," goes beyond the real-world training needs assessment approach presented in this book. In the real world you often find yourself reacting to training requests. In a perfect world, you would have the time and resources to be proactive and engage your client by continuously scanning the organization and the external environment for information indicating trends and patterns in organization needs and training implications. Call it the investigative reporter approach, named after the many television and newspaper reporters who are always taking in and processing information to uncover problems in their city, their country, and the world.

Chapter 10, "A Final Note," offers some food for thought about the role of training needs assessment in the organization, what to do when you don't have time to conduct a proper needs assessment, the field of performance consulting, and ideas for further professional development.

The book also includes references and additional resources, which provide many sources to support your professional growth.

Each chapter opens with a quick access guide—What's Inside This Chapter—to introduce you to the contents of the chapter. Use this section to identify the information it contains and, if you wish, skip ahead to the material most useful to you.

The final section of each chapter—Getting It Done—supports your ability to take the content of that chapter and apply it. A progressive case study will be featured to challenge you in understanding and using the chapter content. You will also find tools that will assist you in applying the concepts to your own situation. Sometimes the tool is a list of questions for you to ponder, sometimes it is a self-assessment questionnaire, and sometimes it is a list of action steps you can take to enhance your training needs assessment skills.

This book strives to make it as easy as possible for you to understand and apply its lessons. Icons throughout the book help you identify key points that can mean the difference between needs assessment success or failure.

Basic Rules

These rules cut to the chase. They are unequivocal and important concepts in the area of training needs assessment.

Noted

This icon is used to give you more detail or explanation about a concept or a principle. It is also occasionally used for a short but productive tangent.

Think About This

These are helpful tips that you can "put in your back pocket" to pull out when needed as you conduct a needs assessment.

Acknowledgments

Preface to the First Edition

This book is for training professionals—instructional designers, trainers, or training department managers—who want to make sure that their training programs meet the performance needs of their organizations. If you're reading this book, it's likely that your goals are to develop the foundation that will ensure the training programs you design and deliver will:

- Have a bottom-line impact on the business needs of your organization.
- Ensure that employee performance on the job contributes to that impact.
- Make certain that the ultimate training design is skill-based to support employee performance back on the job.
- Guarantee that the training delivery and facilitation are attuned to the learning needs of the participants and support an environment of learning.

The purpose of this book is to increase your understanding and experience with conducting training needs assessments and, even more important, to gain your commitment to using needs assessment as the foundation for effective training design, development, delivery, and evaluation.

One caveat: You will notice that the assumption in this book is that the reader is an internal training staff person in an organization. If you are an external trainer or consultant, these methods will work for you as well. Any special considerations for external consultants are highlighted along the way.

I dedicate this book to my husband, Bryan Tobey, and my parents, Barbara and Dale Davis. My sincere thanks go to my friend and colleague Don McCain for his continuing support, listening ear, and suggestions. And, to all of my colleagues over the years whose interaction has stimulated and buoyed me, thanks to you most of all!

Deborah Tobey
April 2005

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Why Needs Assessment?

What's Inside This Chapter

This chapter provides an overview of the book, focusing on the multiple purposes of needs assessment and serving as a foundation for the rest of the book. You'll learn:

- definitions of some important terms
- the purposes of training needs assessment
- the phases in training needs assessment
- how the training needs assessment sets the stage for training evaluation.

1

Why Needs Assessment?

Introduction: An Analogy

In spring 1985, the developers at Coca-Cola Company came out with a new flavor of Coke, removing traditional Coca-Cola from all store shelves, vending machines, restaurants, and bars. From that point on, only "new Coke" was available. Do you remember what happened? The public hated it—they refused to buy new Coke. The huge uproar resulted in Coca-Cola bringing back "old Coke" just 79 days later, now renamed Coca-Cola Classic.

What happened here? Coca-Cola is a large company, well loved by customers not just for its beverages, but for the nostalgia the brand evokes for its customers and its ties to the history of many countries. However, Coke sales and consumer awareness were down in 1985 and the company sought to do something about it. Unfortunately Coca-Cola didn't appear to do a needs assessment to find out the real problems behind falling Coke sales before forging ahead with what it thought customers wanted, rather than what it turned out they appeared to want. The company made a huge mistake that cost it millions of dollars and loyal customers.

If you have good data that help you understand what the real problem is, then you can solve it, save the company money, and satisfy your employees and customers.

What Is Training Needs Assessment?

Simply put, training needs assessment is the process of identifying how training can help your organization reach its goals. "Training needs assessment is what you do to create the tangible solution(s) to the problem or opportunity" (Rossett 2009). It's interesting that the words *training, skills,* and *learning* do not appear in that definition. One important aspect of a needs assessment is that it helps training professionals provide input for the ultimate training design. However, an even more important feature of a needs assessment is establishing that there is a business need, driving a performance need, driving a true training need, identifying the specifics

regarding the desired training, and finally, identifying the nontraining issues that are also present and affecting the performance situation. Training can help businesses and organizations solve problems and prepare for opportunities.

Although training itself certainly provides skills and learning and development, the training needs assessment is the preliminary process that ensures the training is grounded in the needs of the organization. Without a needs assessment, trainers risk developing and delivering training programs that do not support organizational needs and, therefore, do not deliver value to the organization or the client. And, the training that is developed may not be accepted by the target audience, or worse, the training may end up being useless and a waste of everyone's time

Implementing a proper training needs assessment helps the organization see the value of the training function and its role as a business partner. Establishing a collaborative relationship with the client during the needs assessment develops a pattern of involvement and joint decision making that can continue throughout the design, delivery, and evaluation steps of the training process. This allows the business stakeholders to be involved in uncovering and solving the true performance problem.

Defining Key Terms

Before beginning an in-depth examination of training needs assessment, two terms that are used throughout this book must be defined: *needs assessor* and *client*.

A needs assessor may be a training, HRD, or HR staff member of an organization who is responsible for the design and delivery of training solutions and is, therefore, responsible for training needs assessment. Alternatively, a needs assessor may be an external training, HRD, or HR professional who works with client organizations to design and deliver training. Anyone reading this book is probably a needs assessor—or will be soon. In this book, the term *needs assessor* is used when referring to individuals in their strict role within the needs assessment process. If a more general or universal comment is necessary, the term *training professional* is used.

The client is the individual that the needs assessor is working with to design and develop the training program. That individual might be a department manager, a department head, or the CEO. Think of the client as the person who will benefit the most from the increased performance of the employees who will participate in the training program. On occasion, an internal professional might have an additional client: his own manager. For example, if you work in HR and the HR director (the boss) is driving the training project or is invested in the outcome in

some way, the HR director would also be the client. And, yes, that means you would be working for two clients.

✅ Basic Rule 1

Needs assessment measures set the foundation for evaluation measures. Start with the end in mind.

Purposes of a Training Needs Assessment

A training needs assessment, when implemented effectively, serves multiple purposes:

- It places the training need or request in the context of the organization's needs. Training adds value only when it ultimately serves a business need.

- It validates and augments the initial issues presented by the client. Clients know their business, no doubt about it! But, sometimes they don't know the cause of or remedy for issues that involve human performance. The needs assessment can reveal different information, provide broader context for the information supplied by the client, and offer different perspectives on the client's initial impressions.

- It ensures that the ultimate training design supports employee performance and thereby helps the organization meet its needs. A significant portion of a training needs assessment encompasses gathering information to support the training design, identify and capture skills and knowledge, and ensure that the design replicates the learners' jobs as closely as possible.

- It results in recommendations regarding nontraining issues that are affecting the achievement of the desired organization and employee performance goals. The main question is this: If the ultimate training program is perfect, what else is going on in the organization that will result in the business needs not being met? There are several reasons why it is critical that the needs assessor identify these issues and provide recommendations to rectify them. First, there is a much greater likelihood of achieving the desired business and performance results. Second, the training function is held accountable for only the portion of the business and performance needs that it can influence. Third, it increases the value added by the training function to the organization. (Now can you see why the Coke versus new Coke illustration is an apt analogy?)
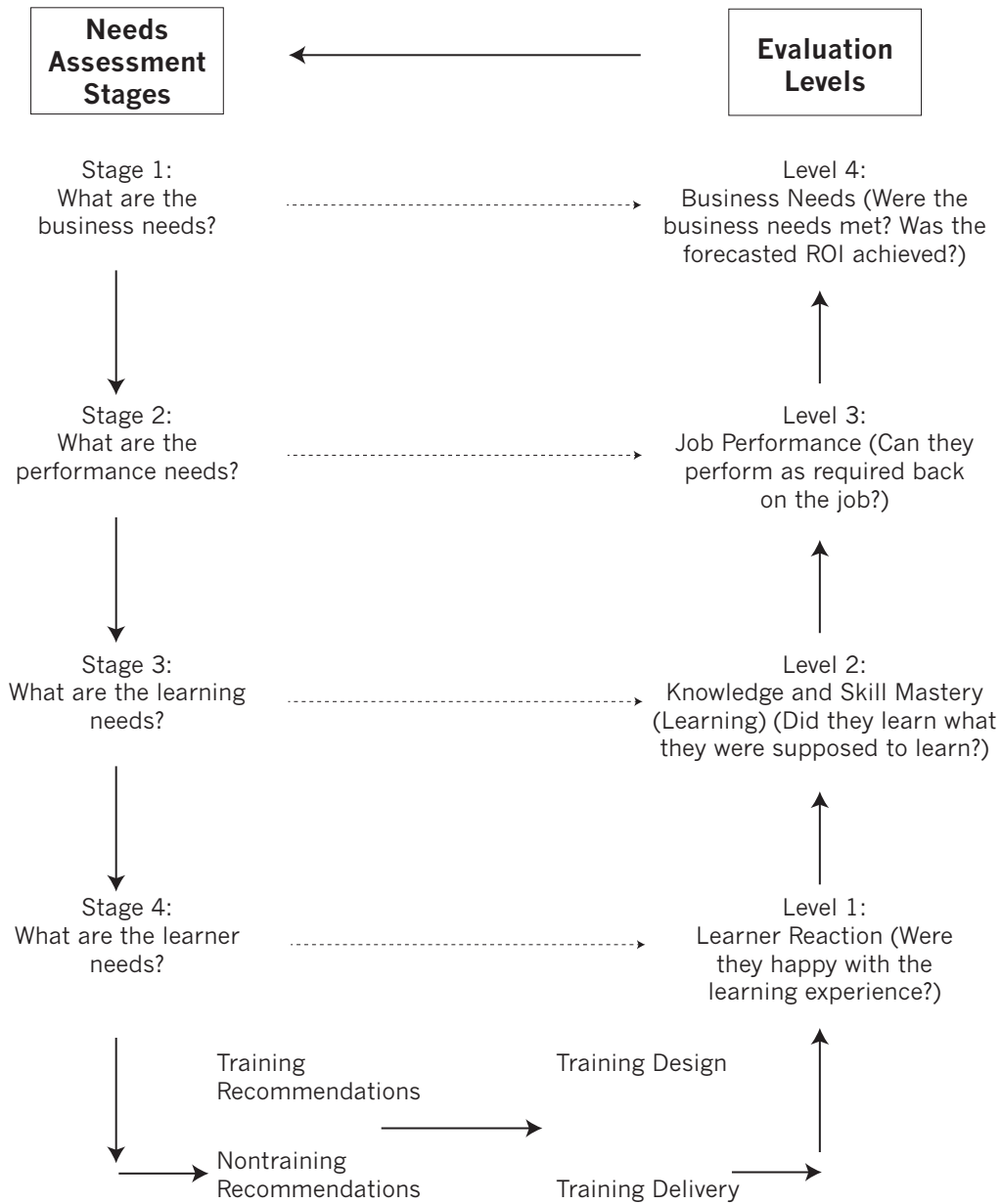
- It helps ensure the survival of the training function. When a training program adds value, the training function is valued for its impact and results and is not at high risk during hard times.
- It establishes the foundation for back-end evaluation. Although this book is about front-end needs assessment, rather than back-end measurement and evaluation, the relationship between the two is very clear. In training and other HRD initiatives, you always start with the end in mind. What do you want people to do that they are not doing now, or what do you want them to do differently from what they are doing now. And how will you know it when you see it? Figure 1-1 illustrates how a needs assessment sets the stage for evaluation. During a training needs assessment, measures are taken at four stages (left side of Figure 1-1): business needs, performance needs, learning needs, and learner needs. During evaluation (which occurs after the training program), the evaluator takes measurements of the same items—now called the four levels of evaluation: learner reaction, learning (knowledge and skill mastery), job performance, and business needs. The goal in training is to be able to identify positive changes in each of the four needs assessment pre-measures when they are measured again during evaluation. Note that after the evaluation business measurement is taken, it can result in the start of a new needs assessment.

ⓦ Think About This

Training recommendations can also include a return on investment (ROI) or a return on expectations (ROE) forecast. An ROI forecast is a prediction of the comparison between the costs of designing, developing, and delivering the training program and the value of the ultimate expected business outcome the training is expected to influence. Clients use the ROI forecast to help decide if a training project is worthwhile; trainers use it to influence the client's decision. This book deals with ROI briefly as a possible needs assessment outcome or recommendation, and it is covered in much greater detail as an evaluation technique in another volume of this series, *Evaluation Basics*, 2nd edition (McCain 2016). An ROE forecast is a prediction of the client's expectations for behavior change at the end of the training and the value of the expected business outcome that the training is expected to influence. Chapter 10 discusses differences between ROI and ROE.

Figure 1-1. Needs Assessment Sets the Stage for Evaluation

Needs Assessment Stages	←	Evaluation Levels

Stage 1: What are the business needs? ┄┄→ **Level 4:** Business Needs (Were the business needs met? Was the forecasted ROI achieved?)

Stage 2: What are the performance needs? ┄┄→ **Level 3:** Job Performance (Can they perform as required back on the job?)

Stage 3: What are the learning needs? ┄┄→ **Level 2:** Knowledge and Skill Mastery (Learning) (Did they learn what they were supposed to learn?)

Stage 4: What are the learner needs? ┄┄→ **Level 1:** Learner Reaction (Were they happy with the learning experience?)

Training Recommendations   Training Design

Nontraining Recommendations   Training Delivery

> ### 💬 Noted
>
> It's not that evaluation can't be implemented for training initiatives for which no needs assessment was conducted. Back-end evaluation measures can still be taken, and the trainer and client can agree on whether or not the back-end measures meet expectations. A more powerful case for organization and performance improvement (not to mention for training itself) is made by matching the needs identified up front with the measures taken at the end, because it demonstrates impact that can be directly attributed to training. This matchup demonstrates training's added value in a very potent way.

Steps in Training Needs Assessment

The seven steps in training needs assessment are depicted in Figure 1-2, and are described in some detail in the following sections.

Step 1. Conduct an External and Internal Organizational Scan

Training professionals spend a significant amount of time scanning the internal and external environment and gathering information from many sources, such as newspapers, current events, annual reports, financial statements, customer service data, strategic plans, benchmarking, and the break room.

Step 2. Collect Data to Identify Business Needs

From the scanning process, the needs assessor is able to identify the current organizational needs, which fall into three categories:

- an opportunity that must be capitalized upon (for example, a new product or market)
- a problem that must be resolved (for example, waste, customer complaints, poor product quality, absenteeism)
- a business strategy that must be supported (for example, a marketing and product approach that caters to a certain age group, or a hospital that wants to brand itself as "the maternity hospital in the community").

Business needs can be identified at the macro level (the overall organization) or at the micro level (one department or unit, depending on who your client is).

Figure 1-2. The Training Needs Assessment Process

Step 1. Conduct an External and Organization Scan

⬇

Step 2. Collect Data to Identify Business Needs

Capitalize on an opportunity
Resolve a problem
Support a strategy

⬇

Step 3. Collect Data to Identify Performance, Learning, and Learner Needs

Required performance
Learners' current performance
Required skills and knowledge
Learners' current skills and knowledge
Learner needs

⬇

Step 4. Analyze Data

Identify key data: gaps in performance,
skills, and knowledge
Identify recommendations

⬇

Step 5. Identify Potential Training Solution

Needed job aids and performance support materials
Types of training methods
Types of training delivery

⬇

Step 6. Deliver Data Analysis Feedback

Training recommendations: design and
delivery; ROI or ROE forecast
Nontraining recommendations: work
environment, rewards, consequences,
work processes

⬇

Transition Step: Begin Training Design

Step 3. Collect Data to Identify Performance, Learning, and Learner Needs

Multiple sources of data must be addressed to identify desired and current job performance, desired and current skill and knowledge level, and learner needs. Each set of needs will likely include skill deficiencies (training needs) and other issues that affect performance (nontraining needs).

Step 4. Analyze Data

Data analysis yields key information that identifies the gaps between desired and current job performance, and between desired and current knowledge and skill levels, so that the ultimate training design will target those gaps. Understanding the magnitude of these gaps also assists the needs assessor in assigning priorities to the various issues that have to be addressed.

Step 5. Identify Potential Training Solutions

At this point in the process, potential training initiatives have usually been identified by either the needs assessor or the client. Sometimes the needs assessors will approach their clients to share discoveries they made during organizational scanning, and sometimes the clients make the first move.

Step 6. Deliver Data Analysis Feedback

The needs assessor makes a presentation or generates a report for the client detailing data analysis, training recommendations for design and delivery, and nontraining recommendations (recommendations to resolve issues that are not caused by knowledge or skill deficiencies).

Transition Step: Begin Training Design Process

This is where the process segues into design. If the needs assessment has been implemented well, the training designer has ample information to produce targeted learning objectives, learning activities, job-relevant content and materials to support activities, measurement and evaluation tools, and a learning environment.

Each of these steps is explored more fully in later chapters. For now, however, notice that this process includes many steps that occur before a training solution is even mentioned. It is critical that any training initiative undertaken be directly linked to the business needs of the organization through internal and external scanning and identification of business needs before any other

work is done. If not, value is not added. This is bad, because if the organization hits a rough spot, functions that haven't added any value are at the highest risk.

✓ **Basic Rule 2**

Training needs assessment results in training that supports business needs first and, in so doing, adds value to the organization.

Needs Assessment Basics will provide you with ample food for thought, tools, checklists, and worksheets to help you make these materials and concepts yours. We recommend that you make copies of the checklists and tools, or transfer them to spreadsheets to use as templates for your projects. Ready to get started?

Buy This Book!