

Training Needs Assessment 101

Fred Nickols

© Fred Nickols 2005
All rights reserved



A Few Words Up Front

This paper was written in response to a request from Cris Wildermuth, a member of the Western Ohio chapter of the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) and editor of the chapter's newsletter, *Professional Insight*. In May of 2005, Cris posted a request to the TRDEV-L list on Yahoo groups asking for a volunteer to write a brief paper on needs assessment for inclusion in her chapter's newsletter. I responded with this paper which, in slightly different form, was published in the June 2005 issue of the newsletter.

TNA Is A Configurable Process

The first and most important thing to know about Training Needs Assessment (TNA) is this: *it is a process that must be configured to meet the situation at hand*. In other words, there is no "canned" TNA process to be followed step by step. For one thing, TNA can be triggered by several different circumstances, each of which poses its own goals and requirements. For another, TNA is an information-based, analytical activity and several means of collecting and analyzing information might be used (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, observations, data collection and analyses), not all of which are appropriate in all situations. So, when it comes to TNA, you have to take stock of the situation facing you and devise an appropriate approach.

TNA As A System

As a system, TNA is marked by inputs and the transformation of those inputs into outputs. The primary output or product of a TNA consists of recommendations and accompanying rationales. These recommendations and rationales might or might not justify pursuing training. A TNA doesn't always lead to training. Its conclusions might be that training is not needed or that some other course of action is more appropriate (e.g., job aids, improved measurement and feedback, goal clarification and even job or work redesign). It is also possible that TNA will lead to training plus something else. And, of course, there is always the possibility that a TNA will result in a decision to do nothing at all. The inputs to TNA are informational, including its triggers, and vary with the occasion.

TNA Triggers

A TNA can be triggered in several ways, chief among which is someone deciding that training is the solution to a problem. This often surfaces as a request for training. In such cases, the focus of the TNA is to clearly identify the problem to be solved and to confirm or disconfirm the relevance of training.

A TNA can also be triggered by mandated training (e.g., safety training required by law, harassment training in the aftermath of a lawsuit, and the maintenance of professional credentials and licenses). In these cases, the aim of the TNA is one of ensuring that whatever training is provided (a) satisfies the mandate and (b) contributes as much as possible to improved performance. This holds true whether the mandate comes from external or internal sources.

A TNA is also germane to situations in which the requirement for training seems obvious (e.g., new hires with little or no work experience, the installation of new systems and processes, and technological changes). As before, the goal of a TNA is to determine the

requirements to be satisfied and confirm or disconfirm the relevance and utility of training. Even here, training might not be the answer. Training serves to remedy skill and knowledge gaps. Its effectiveness relies on learning and learning can occur and be facilitated via means other than training (e.g., job aids, self-instructional materials, coaching and mentoring to name a few).

TNA Defined

As the preceding comments make clear, TNA can take various forms and have differing emphases. The term itself suggests at least three possible kinds of analyses.

1. TNA could refer to *the assessment of a stated or claimed need for training*. This is what typically happens when a training specialist is presented with a request for training by someone who has determined that training is the solution to a problem.
2. TNA could refer to *an assessment that identifies gaps in results (i.e., needs) that can be addressed by training*. Thus, TNA might encompass or be linked to other kinds of analyses. Some call this kind of analysis “performance analysis” or just plain “needs assessment.”
3. TNA could refer to *an assessment of training that identifies gaps (i.e., needs) in training results*. Here, the problem lies with training itself and training is unlikely to be the solution.

It is not clear from the literature that there is widespread agreement as to the nature of TNA. So, which is it? Frankly, it probably doesn't matter what the analysis is called as long as the analyst in question is clear about the aims and nature of the analysis and carries it out in an appropriate and effective manner.

TNA and Gap Analysis

Many of those who write about TNA assert that it is essentially a gap analysis, a look at current conditions and required conditions, with the further aim of determining how training might (or might not) close any gaps. Gaps in results (also referred to as “needs”) can be couched in terms of organizational performance, in terms of individual performance, or in terms of the skill and knowledge required by performers or acquired by learners. Conducting such an analysis requires specifying the required conditions, determining the current conditions, identifying any gaps and then analyzing those gaps to confirm or disconfirm the links between organizational or individual performance and individual skill or knowledge of the kind addressable by training. That is a skill and process all its own. It can also be a time-consuming, labor-intensive and thus costly activity. It's probably a good idea to avoid proposing a formal, rigorous gap analysis if (a) it's not relevant or (b) its costs outweigh those of the problem or the training being considered.

TNA and Context

A TNA is typically conducted by a training specialist or a performance analyst, perhaps someone on staff or perhaps an outside consultant. This might be in response to a request for training or as part of some larger initiative. In either case, there is a larger context, a “big

picture” if you will. First, the training department has its own survival requirements to look after and being viewed as “responsive” is often a key factor in that. Second, all organizations are social systems and politics is a factor in everything. Your choices are simple: play the game or sit on the sidelines – but, never use TNA purely for political advantage. If you do, you run the risk of destroying the utility and credibility of an oftentimes important tool. And, when you’re contemplating a TNA as part of a major initiative, don’t let TNA get positioned as an obstacle, as a drag on progress. Remember: TNA is an adaptable tool, not a lock-step procedure.

Conclusion

TNA is a useful tool but it is a tool that must be adapted for the task and conditions at hand. As a consequence, it might be a sizable effort all its own or it might turn out to be much more modest, maybe even “quick and dirty.” TNA can involve one set of activities and resources on one occasion and a very different set of activities and resources on another. However, the ends remain the same: recommendations and accompanying rationales regarding training – to make use of it or not, to pursue some other course of action, or to couple training with some other intervention. No matter the approach you take to TNA, two criteria must be satisfied: whatever you do had better be viewed as sensible and as defensible in the context and the culture where you are working.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is Managing Partner of the Distance Consulting Company, LLC. He maintains a web site at www.nickols.us and he can be reached via e-mail at fred@nickols.us.