

Training Needs Assessment 101

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Fred Nickols



This post suggests that Training Needs Assessment is a term that has various meanings and manifestations and trainers are well-served by being clear what they are about when they set about doing a training needs assessment.

Tools and their Users

Peter Drucker wrote that “tools bridge the gap between work and working.” One of a trainer’s chief tools is the process of training needs assessment (TNA). In hard times like those many of us face in today’s world of work, putting our tools to good use becomes ever more important and that, in turn, hinges on having a good grasp of their strengths and limitations. “Worker, know your tools,” is sage counsel. So, in this post, I’d like to take a look at that trainer’s tool we all sometimes refer in shorthand as “TNA” (standing for Training Needs Assessment).

TNA Is a Configurable Process

The first and most important thing to know about Training Needs Assessment (TNA) is that *it is a process that must be configured to meet the situation at hand*. There is no “canned” TNA process to be followed step by step. TNA can be triggered by different circumstances, each of which poses its own goals and requirements. TNA is an information-based, analytical activity and various 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.

TNA as A System

As a system, TNA is marked by the transformation of inputs into outputs. The primary output or product of a TNA consists of recommendations and accompanying rationales. These 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 there is always the possibility that a TNA will result in a decision to do nothing at all.

TNA Triggers

A TNA can be triggered in several ways, chief among which is 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.

A TNA is also relevant in situations where 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).

TNA Defined

As my 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 can 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 can 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.
3. TNA can 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.

TNA and Gap Analysis

Many of those who write about TNA assert that it is 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, individual performance, or in terms of the skill and knowledge required by performers. 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. TNA 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 it’s not relevant or 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 one of a trainer’s most useful tools 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

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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 how you approach TNA, two criteria must be satisfied: whatever you do had better be viewed as (a) sensible and (b) defensible in the context and the culture where you are working.