

Should organisations
conduct a training
needs analysis?



To TNA, or not to TNA: Should organisations conduct a ' Training Needs Analysis' in the course of organisational training?

The practice of providing training has become increasingly important for all organisations. With increasing competition in specialised services and an ever-demanding market, organisations are recognising that training and employee development is essential in order to maintain a competitive edge, to retain sufficient market share and to promote an enthusiastic and efficient workforce. Despite training sometimes being viewed as an obligatory, time consuming and costly process; most organisations are now aware of its benefits and consider it as a “ strategic weapon in the battle for competitive advantage” (Blume, Ford, Baldwin & Huang, 2010, pg 1066). Regardless of the obvious benefits of training in tackling job performance problems, there are a number of these problems which fail to be resolved through training. For example, targeting poor performance as a direct result of inadequate ventilation, noisy surroundings, poor lighting and faulty equipment would be unsuitable. In most cases, systematic or ergonomic inadequacies are not rectified through training (Peterson, 1998). Similarly, training should not be used as a reward for good performance (Brown, 2002). Inappropriate and ill conceived training which lacks careful planning can often result in further setbacks for the organisation. To avoid such problems, it has been proposed that performing a systematic training needs analysis (TNA) can significantly improve both the effectiveness and quality of training programmes (I. L. Goldstein & Ford, 2002; Kraiger & Aguinis, 2001; McGehee & Thayer, 1961). Despite most training researchers understanding the value of conducting a TNA, the lack of theoretical and empirical data highlights a neglected area

within research (Deirdorff & Surface, 2008; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Kraiger, 2003).

This essay will begin with a general description of the TNA process before exploring a prominent model proposed by Mcgehee and Thayer (1961). A critical evaluation of whether the advantages outweigh the drawbacks will then be followed by a short discussion on the gaps in literature, along with proposals for further study.

In today's competitive market, organisational investments ranging from introducing specialist machinery to keeping updated with the latest software all require some sort of training, to ensure effective and safe practice. Additionally, employees also expect more from their careers, including the opportunity to develop and progress within the organisation and offering training can have a significant impact on both the overall perception of the business and the employee's motivation to work for the organisation. Aguinis (2009) suggested that training translates into a message that the organisation cares for its employee's. However to maximise the effectiveness of the training, it is vital that organisations pinpoint exactly where training is required, what skills need to be taught and which employees require the training (Goldstein, 1993) . A TNA refers to the process of determining these factors within an organisation, in addition to identifying “ cues and cognitions” that facilitate trainee's to know when to apply the new skills in their daily jobs (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001, pg 7).

Several models of TNA have been offered in literature (Mager & Pipe, 1984; Rummler & Brache, 1995; Taylor, O'Driscoll & Binning, 1998; Leigh, Watkins,

Platt & Kaufman, 2000), however in 1961, Mcgehee and Thayer proposed one of the most prominent frameworks for executing an effective TNA. Authors suggest that a thorough TNA consists of an analysis at three distinct levels: Organisational, Task and Person; consequently identifying the organisational needs from every angle.

Firstly, 'Organisational' analysis aims to highlight the different areas/departments which require training. Goldstein (1991) defined this analysis as an examination of the system-wide components that determine whether training can have a significant impact on job performance. Brown (2002) promotes its usefulness in identifying the appropriate conditions required for successful training, in addition to predicting and planning for organisational change. For example, management must consider how the skill needs of the future organisation may differ from those required at present. The installation of new equipment and changes in standard procedures all create the need for new training programmes, in order to ensure the safe and efficient use of equipment; ultimately yielding an optimum level of productivity. Furthermore, with the increasing diversity of the population, organisations must consider and accommodate for the variety of training needs of women, minorities, immigrants and older employees; ensuring all needs are equally considered (Brown, 2002). Lastly, all training programme must be designed in a way which avoids discrimination or biasing against a particular gender, disability, ethnic group or age group, and thus a thorough organisational analysis should identify specific conditions and employee requirements, allowing all employees to benefit equally from training.

Secondly, 'Task' analysis identifies the "knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA's) needed to perform" tasks on the job (Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992, pg 402). Essentially, organisations must be able to identify discrepancies between the current level of KSA and the level required in order to meet organisational targets, thus indicating a need for training (Brown, 2002). This is especially important in modern organisations where technology updates are rapidly being introduced and thus highlighting necessary adjustments in KSA requirements. Howell & Cooke (1989) argued that tasks are becoming cognitively more demanding – "what were once highly structured tasks may now call for inference, diagnoses, judgement, and decision making" (pg 123), which stresses the importance of conducting a task analysis (analysing both cognitive processes involved in job performance as well as KSAs). As a result, practitioners can then design and deliver the most appropriate training which firstly corresponds to organisational objectives, and secondly ensures that employees are better able to do their jobs from having an improved skill set in relevant areas (Grace, 2001).

The third element- 'Person' (or 'Individual') analysis identifies employees within the organisation who require specific training. They may be identified through poor performance appraisals or goal attainment records which may expose a need for training. Feldman (1988) claims that the unique training needs of new employees are often misjudged and reports that the delivery of formal training usually fails to meet these needs in regards to relevant content at the appropriate level of difficulty. This suggests an inadequate or lack of person analysis and can result in the delivery of expensive training to the wrong individuals; ultimately costing the organisation both time and

training budget (Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992). Employee skills, attitude and training motivation are also determined through the analysis, in order to predict which employees would benefit most from receiving training.

Tannenbaum & Yukl (1992) suggest that individuals who lack basic skills or motivation to learn are less likely benefit from the training and transfer skills on to their jobs. Therefore, person analysis can aid in distinguishing which individuals require remedial preparation before attending formal training in order to maximise the benefits of the programme.

Ideally, a TNA combines the training needs data from all three levels, and practitioners utilise various methods in order to gather this information; ranging from using observations, interviews, focus groups and advisory committees to surveys, questionnaires and assessment centres. Once needs have been defined, trainers must decide which needs can be met through formal training, before proposing a specific design for the programme. Although this is a lengthy process, the benefits of developing a tailored training plan to suit the exact needs of both the organisation and the employees can have a significant impact on the growth and improvement of the organisation as a whole.

Several authors promote the benefits of conducting an in-depth TNA for the positive impact it has on the organisation (Brown, 2002; Arthur, Bennett, Edens & Bell, 2003; Blanchard & Thacker, 2007; Fox 2003); however, these are often overshadowed by the various drawbacks and limitations associated with the process. Arthur et al. (2003) highlights this in recent findings where studies conducting TNA represented only 6% of data within a meta-analysis of training effectiveness. Therefore an assessment of the limitations will

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firstly enhance our understanding of why very few organisations employ the procedure and secondly evaluate the extent to which the benefits do outweigh the drawbacks.

Firstly, although the analysis allows for data driven decisions surrounding the design, development and delivery of training content (Arthur et al., 2003), the fact remains clear that the process of training requires a major financial investment; estimated to range between \$55. 3 billion and \$200 billion annually (bassi & Van Buren 1999; McKenna 1990). More recently, Paradise (2007) reported that US organisations were spending over \$123 billion annually on training alone. Organisations must anticipate and plan for continuous changes which eventually require larger training investments. Firstly, the fact that training needs are continuously changing highlights the need for an ongoing needs assessment, and secondly introducing specialist machinery/software can be very expensive to materialise in any organisation, due to the costs behind training staff and maintenance, and therefore organisations must calculate the potential cost benefits for applying these changes and providing formal training. Considering these costs, there are now growing concerns that all training must be justified in terms of improving elements of performance, productivity, profit or safety (Huselid, 1995; Martocchio & Baldwin, 1997; Kaufman & Guerra, 2001), however Swanson's (2001) research identified less than 5% of organisation were assessing the financial benefits of training programs. It would be irrational for any organisation to invest heavily into general training programmes, without understanding or identifying how training will of benefit, thus conducting a TNA to examine the real training needs and to

determine the best ways of dealing with them, would be essential in ensuring that overall costs are kept to the crucial minimum. Detterman & Sternberg (1993) report that that almost 90% of all training in their sample of American organisations was a waste of both time and money. It can be argued that a lack of consideration to assess and plan training in areas of design and content, delivery and post-training support can ultimately result in inadequate and worthless training. This highlights the importance of conducting a TNA in general and underlines how organisations can expect a better return on their investments with tailor made training to meet the specific needs of employees.

Moreover it has been suggested that many organisations avoid performing a TNA for the reason that it is time consuming and complex, and quick processes are usually preferred over the prolonged. Unfortunately, the information gathered through simple surveys/questionnaires may be insufficient if used alone. Successful assessments demand patience, attention to detail and a determination to search for the performance facts and their resultant implications (Peterson, 1998). Training practitioners must gather appropriate data, then identify areas requiring training before estimating how much of the budget will be required to provide training. Organisation must appreciate the lengthy process and fully understand that a TNA identifies only a snapshot of the training needs and thus further adjustment must be anticipated (Peterson 1998). Despite the lengthy process, administering a TNA results in more than just better training programmes; it becomes a vital component of better management in general by examining the organisations overall effectiveness- much like an “

operational audit” of how well the business is performing (Peterson, 1998, pg 16).

Organisations face further challenges through ensuring that training practitioners are capable of carrying out the assessment efficiently. Frances and Roland Bee (1994) highlight that a TNA should concentrate on “ actual performance needs as opposed to wants or dictates of those with power, influence and organisational titles” (pg 2). Ideally, practitioners must understand the “ basic concepts, approaches and tools of business planning” (Darling, 1993, pg 4), and be able to associate future needs of the organisation with training needs of the employees. Additionally, practitioners must be able to select suitable methods of data collection which measure the actual performance of employees rather than what they profess to be doing in their jobs, thus self report measures would probably be unsuitable. After collecting valid data, practitioners can measure current performance; highlight weakest areas which would benefit from training, determine how much money will be required and design programmes to meet these needs. This data would also serve as a criterion to compare against post training performance, in order to attribute any improvement to effective training. Despite the various advantages mentioned above, Saari et al. (1988) found that only 27% of companies had formal procedures for assessing managerial level training, thus highlighting that most organisations lack the expert knowledge in conducting an effective TNA and therefore fail to benefit from the potential returns. Darling (1993) suggested that the activities of most organisational trainers are restricted to assessing the training needs of individual employees, as opposed to assessing an entire organisation.

Therefore, many practitioners fail to acquire the knowledge, experience and skills necessary to contribute to improving performance at an organisational scale. By limiting the development of training staff due to the extra costs of training, organisations are actually restricting themselves from reaping the full benefits of a TNA.

Although we have established the importance of conducting a TNA, the challenges that an organisation faces often forces them to overlook the importance/benefits of training assessments. However, by conducting a cost benefit analysis within the TNA process, organisations can assess the expected long term benefits against the costs, and then determine whether training is a sensible option. Arthur et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 1152 effect sizes from 165 sources and confirmed that in comparison with no training, training had an overall positive effect on job related behaviours and performances; thus conducting a thorough TNA to begin the process would further ensure a worthwhile investment. Failing to or conducting an inadequate TNA can cause several problems; for example, employees may suffer from skill shortages as their needs have not been met and consequently this would result in poor performance. Eventually, this could lead to loss of business, increased overtime work and thus higher rates of pay. Finally, training budgets may be inappropriately allocated, resulting in higher costs of recruitment and increased rates of employee stress and pressure. Overall, the lack of conducting a thorough TNA can lead to unnecessary extra costs and can question the success of the organisation as a whole (Darling, 1993).

Although the topic of TNA is widely discussed, critics slate the fact that empirical work in this research area is very limited, and the actual effectiveness of TNA in organisations is a much-neglected area of training and development research (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Dierdorff & Surface, 2008; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992). Salas & Cannon- Bowers (2001) support this view and further highlight the need for “ practical and diagnostic tools to determine the organisational context relative to training” (pg 6). Colquitt et al. (2000) further extends this and suggests the need to assess personality variables, emotions, adaptability, trait goal orientation and other Big Five variables during the person analysis, for the reason that specific personality traits may indicate a higher tolerance for learning. It has also been suggested that trainee motivation levels are important in ensuring training is effective. Employees must have the desire to learn in order for the training to be effective (Bee & Bee, 1994), and Wlodkowski’s (1985) findings suggest trainee participation in the TNA process enhances motivation to learn. Aguinis & Kraiger (2009) summarise that more empirical research is essentially required in order to promote the benefits of a TNA and enhance the current understanding of how the quality of a training design and delivery is affected by factors influencing the quality of a TNA.

To conclude, this essay has identified the purposes and potential advantages of conducting a detailed TNA, along with highlighting some of the challenges that organisations face in proceeding with the assessment. It is a common stereotype that TNA is an expensive, laborious and time-consuming process; however, despite the sheer cost and time invested in implementing such an assessment, it is important for all organisations to question whether they can

really afford to risk the success of their organisation by overlooking the importance of conducting a TNA. In spite of everything, it is the overall organisation that ultimately pays the largest price because low levels of productivity and skill shortages become the largest liabilities, but when training is planned and delivered appropriately, the trained workforce become the largest assets. It is, therefore, fair to say that the benefits of conducting an effective TNA should ultimately outweigh the initial drawbacks, thus stressing the importance of conducting a TNA during the process of organisational training.