Training Designers Club

HOW TO…

IDENTIFY TRAINING NEEDS

A Training Needs Analysis (TNA) helps to make sure that any training designed meets the needs of the various stakeholders. It's important to conduct one even when stakeholders (often senior managers or clients) think they know what the problem is and tell you how it ought to be solved. They may be completely right with their diagnosis, but often they've selected the most obvious, or the first of many, possible solutions. They may decide 'training' is needed, when it isn't going to solve the problem. A good TNA can help them to consider other options that might have better results.

Even when training IS the right thing to do, conducting a TNA isn't always popular, especially when timescales are short and stakeholders have strong personalities or hold all the power. But that doesn't mean we should miss it out. If you explain that conducting a TNA will help to make sure that the solution meets their needs exactly, even the most belligerent of managers should understand, even if it means you need to tailor what you do and how you do it.

Essentially, a TNA is 'GAP' analysis, where you:

- specify the problem that you need to solve
- identify the ideal state (i.e. what the organisation/manager WANTS people to do)
- identify the current state (i.e. what is happening now)
- specify the differences between the two (clearly and in specific terms)
- identify which gaps can be addressed by training (and which need to be addressed by other means).

And as you can imagine, each of these points can be explored in different ways and to different depths, and there's no right (or best) way to conduct a TNA. However, here are some practical tips to help you find the right solutions.

1. **Specify the problem that needs to be solved** - The first part of any TNA should be about truly understanding the problems people face at the moment, and the benefits they will get from solving them. Adults tend to be less interested in learning content, and much more focused on making things easier for themselves. Understand the issues from the 'users' perspective to provide a focus point for the research and design.

2. **Identify the ideal outcome** – Clarify 'what good looks like' from a number of different perspectives. Different people have different ideas, and they could actually be in direct conflict. Make sure that you can describe the ideal state in specific terms, and challenge any vague language.

3. **Speak to sponsors & stakeholders** – Get many different viewpoints so that your analysis isn't biased. Speak to different stakeholders, send out questionnaires, observe people in practice, analyse data, run focus groups – the more information you can get from different sources, the more robust your TNA will be.

4. **Identify standards** – Be clear about the targets/standards that people are expected to achieve after the training. This helps to avoid scope creep and aids evaluation of the training. Opinions can change – standards don't.

5. **Research best practice** – Identify those in your organization who already do this well and study what they do that makes them more successful (it's often just the little things). Be curious about happens elsewhere, and use this to stimulate your thinking and be innovative.

6. **Identify current reality** – Part of your research and observations should be to specify the starting point. Where are people now in relation to the desired end state? This will help you to keep the training realistic. It will also help you to identify the obstacles that you'll need to overcome to make the training successful so this can be considered as part of your design.

7. **Speak to the intended audience** – Often the people doing the job have some great ideas about how they can do it better and what help they need. This may be very different from those looking at the situation from above or outside (but remember everyone only sees their own perspective). An added bonus of speaking to the intended audience is that you become accustomed to their language. You can then reflect this in your training which will make it more accessible and more meaningful.

8. **Look for specific examples** – These help to drive home specific aspects of the training and provide great source material which can be adapted to bring the training to life as examples or case studies. This in turn aids transfer of learning.

9. **Understand the culture and context** – Looking outside of the organization to benchmark against others can be very useful, but remember to take this in context… there's no point trying to do what a global tech giant does if you're a national skip-hire company. Some audiences will respond well to a tech-based solution, whereas others will push against it. Some want bite-size, others would rather have 2 full days. Use what's right for THEM, not what's right for you.

10. **Clarify what is and is not, a training need** – Many gaps in performance are down to poor communication, inefficient or outdated processes, lack of resources, or poor performance management. Training generally works well if people need to develop knowledge and/or skills. Pick out which parts of the 'problem' can be met via training, and which can't.

11. **Identify specific outcomes** – Linked to the previous point, summarise your research by specifying exactly what people will be able to do after completing (and applying) training so they know exactly how it will help them.

12. **Avoid generalizing** – A training needs analysis will uncover lots of different needs and lead you to identify lots of different solutions. The pressure is often there to cover them ALL in one course. The problem then is that the courses doesn't REALLY meet anyone's needs. The course deals with an average situation, which actually suits no-one. Better designing four specific 2-hour workshops than one 8-hour one and allowing people to attend those that will be valuable.