A Proactive Model for Training Needs Analysis

The Traditional Model

Much organizational training which is carried out today is based on a traditional, mechanistic approach to adult learning which probably has its antecedents in the Industrial Revolution of over 200 years ago. This approach received a considerable fillip this century from the vast industrial and military training needs thrown up by two world wars and from the introduction of mass production techniques into manufacturing industries. In curriculum design, American educationalist Ralph Tyler[1] proposed a simple four-stage model based on the precise specification of instructional objectives which was to become the basis for the so-called “systems approach” to training.

The starting point for the process, as recommended by numerous textbook models, is the identification of training needs as they relate to individual or organizational performance. The focus is very much on job behaviour and task analysis, with the gathering of quantitative data from field observations, structured questionnaires and formal interviews being the major emphasis. Naturally this can be very expensive and time-consuming and the original needs may well have changed by the time the data has been analysed and the subsequent training programmes designed and delivered. However, such a comprehensive approach is rare: most organizations follow their own less systematic procedures based on tradition, office politics and various internal and external pressures.

A major problem with focusing mainly on job performance is that the concept of a “job” is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Jobs which did not exist a few years ago are now common in most industries, while many former jobs have totally disappeared. Organizations are continuing to rationalize their staffing levels and industrial agreements are introducing concepts such as broadbanding, multitasking and career path planning into previously static occupations. Skill requirements change to meet new labour market demands or new social and economic imperatives. Training is also starting to be seen as part of an organic learning experience rather than simply a didactic process[2]. Human resource professionals must prepare people for a world of work quite unlike anything which has gone before. It is not sufficient to simply pass on the technical skills required to perform the job as it now exists without equipping people with the skills to cope when the job changes, as it inevitably will. The idea that organizations must initiate and continue to foster transformative learning and that the role of the trainer will be increasingly to facilitate change is a common theme in recent literature[3-6].

A Holocaust educationalist Stephen Brookfield warns of a further shortcoming of traditional training models[7]. Their insistence that training must be outcome-oriented and derived from predetermined behavioural objectives neglects the possibility of unplanned learning occurring and the important roles played by insight, reflection and discovery on the part of adult learners. Since these are the very sorts of learning skills needed for future work it could be argued that rigid behavioural objectives are antipathetic to current notions of competence. It is also important not to lose sight of the fact that training is about helping people to learn and to work more effectively. The human component is conspicuously absent from circuit diagrams.

A Proactive Approach to Training

In the leaner, more results-oriented organizations of today, training must be a deliberate organizational strategy and not just a reaction to a problem or a political decision based on managerial whim. Training must be seen to contribute directly and unambiguously. It must be perceived as a proactive process which anticipates trends and future changes and which

Examines four key challenges in developing learning environments.
prepares people to meet them. Anything less will result in the marginalization of the training department and a reduction in its status to that of a service provider divorced from mainstream activities.

While training must continue to teach people things they do not know, it must also be about building on what is already known. A proactive approach, unlike the deficit models, will actively seek out ways to help people further develop existing strengths and encourage them to improve both the quality of their contribution to the organization and their life at work. Such an approach about the nature of training needs analysis.

For instance, the view of needs analysis as description research centred on data-collection may need to give way to an action research approach [8,9]. An action research approach means the investigator is involved with stakeholders in an ongoing process of defining present and future needs, anticipating change, implementing solutions and evaluating effectiveness. Action follows as a planned consequence of consultation, negotiation, observation and reflection. Minor problems are addressed immediately and solutions to larger problems are continuously evolving. Methodologies include qualitative as well as quantitative techniques and factors sometimes neglected, such as values, intuitive insights and feelings, inform the analysis. Expressed needs and wants will be considered together with the more apparent needs imposed through executive or legislative mandate and needs reflected through performance-related problems.

This means the emphasis of needs analysis will have shifted from looking for the cause of a problem to assisting people in their work and careers and to helping them achieve greater future proficiency and satisfaction. This certainly involves problem correction and the identification of skills and knowledge currently lacking, but the emphasis is on future efficiency, not past deficiencies. It requires an attitudinal shift on the part of trainers and managers to see training as much more than basic skilling. As such it mirrors the TQM philosophy of continuous amelioration rather than the “send them away to be fixed” attitude which permeates much traditional thinking about training. It means training is not something which only happens in a training room but is a normal part of work. It also encourages the abolition of the artificial barriers between training as skill acquisition and human resource development as career enhancement.

An Integrated Model of Needs Analysis

Despite a general acknowledgement of the importance of thorough needs analysis, a lot of training programmes are based on personal wants rather than identified needs. When it is actually done, needs analysis is often based on trial and error or conducted in a fairly ad hoc manner. Trainers seem to lack a theoretical basis for what they are doing and often fail to integrate training activities into the wider organizational context. The following process model (see Figure 1) seeks to provide a more strategic and integrated approach to needs analysis. It assumes a nexus between training and the organization’s mission and strategies. The stages are interconnected and naturalistic rather than definite and discrete. Some key issues for each of the main stages are described below, although it should be recognized that the issues raised and the questions asked at any stage will vary along with the diversity of human and organizational types involved.

Figure 1. The Training Needs Analysis Cycle
The Organizational Scan Stage
Before undertaking a full needs analysis, it is wise to conduct an initial scan. This is a broad sensing stage. It is designed to uncover the potential issues and to help clarify the problem or the situation which has led to the decision to conduct a needs analysis. It allows the subsequent investigation to be planned more precisely. It aims to:

- build a picture;
- identify stakeholders;
- discover sources of informal power and influence;
- uncover attitudes;
- reveal trends;
- identify likely sources and support the opposition;
- identify constraints.

It tries to sort the pieces of the jigsaw which will enable the investigator to concentrate effort where it will be most useful and to select methodologies most likely to be effective. Questions which need to be considered at this stage of the needs analysis process include:

- What is the mission of the organization and the objectives of its various departments/sections? Are they being met?
- Who are the key players and/or opinion leaders?
- What are the indicators of organizational success?
- How does the structure, culture and operating environment of the organization impact on its success and on work performance?
- How are roles and functions defined and valued?
- What changes in mission or methods or management are on the horizon?
- Do people enjoy their jobs?
- What areas are experiencing problems or facing change?
- What is the role of training as perceived by different stakeholders?

There are many issues which need to be explored in order to relate training and HRD initiatives to organizational goals. Often relevant information is not readily accessible. It may not be formally documented or even as yet defined. The concept of organizational culture, for instance, is often problematic. It may be inferred from the goals, policies and concerns of management but is more likely to be sensed through observations and informal discussions. How committed are people to this organization? Do people feel comfortable with each other? What things are valued? What type of performance is rewarded? Who are the heroes and who are the villains? What is the prevailing ethos?

Important information like this is unlikely to be provided by responses to a standard “Needs Assessment Questionnaire”. At this initial stage observation and insight are likely to be the main research tools required. Individuals and work groups may often be unaware of how their jobs and their environments are changing, while management may prefer solutions which were successful in the past.

Observation and insight are the main research tools required

The challenge will be to approach the development of training strategies in a more holistic way. This will involve integrating both business and individual needs within a framework which acknowledges all the contributors to occupational competence and organizational success.

The Focusing/Data Collection Stages
The initial scan will already have revealed a considerable amount of information and the researcher is now in a position to identify what additional things need to be known. The scan has helped to avoid the sort of drift-net trawling for information and clues which can be frustrating and time-consuming and which usually results in too much data to process and too many issues to address. At the next stage the need is to focus the investigation more sharply. Which people, which sections, which jobs are to be investigated? People tend to be more co-operative if approached with specific questions for a specific reason. Apart from saving their time it means there will be less likelihood of return visits to follow up points the researcher neglected to raise earlier.

The data collection stage involves a more formal investigative process, since decisions subsequently made must be capable of being justified to senior managers and accountants. It is important to concentrate the search on individuals and groups who are able to supply the required information. General surveys of large populations are costly, time consuming and frequently meaningless. Discussions need to centre on present the
future work and competency requirements rather than past practices. They should also consider likely trends and future opportunities in the industry or enterprise in addition to current problems.

Methodologies need to be selected and strategies for managing change considered. The needs analysis is a systems intervention in its own right and hence the implications of change need careful thought from the outset. This stage is one of close consultation and thorough data collection. Methodologies could include structured interviews with key stakeholders, targeted questionnaires and record or database searches. Group workshop methods such as a Dacum panel, a search conference or a focus group discussion provide useful data and ideas fairly quickly. They also promote the consultative and participatory processes so necessary for later support of training and other HRD initiatives.

At the data collection stage the questions will to some extent be determined by what is already known or sensed. However, each source of information will shed new light on the issues involved and reveal unique perspectives which could be of considerable value at a later training design stage. The questions must be capable of generating data which, if not always statistically quantifiable, at least represents some sort of consensus view. If training seems to be indicated it is important to discover the real competency requirements of the positions concerned and not limit the analysis simply to task breakdowns.

In this regard questions such as the following may prove useful:

- What is the main purpose of this position? Why does the job exist?
- What are the main duty and task areas?
- What are the competency requirements in terms of knowledge, skill, attitude, experience?
- What demands does the position place on the incumbent in terms of problem solving, decision making, task management, personal relationships and environmental management?
- How does the work performed in this section relate to work performed in other sections? What are the reporting lines?
- What problems are currently being faced? How might these be solved?
- How could the work be done better? What would make a difference?
- What new technological or procedural changes are anticipated?
- How personally satisfying is the work? What are the rewards?
- What are the sources of frustration?
- What needs to be changed?

The Data Interpretation Stage

Data only becomes meaningful information once it has been organized and considered. At this stage the significance of the data previously gathered needs to be determined. Data by itself means little, but it can assist judgement and aid decision making, although a lot will depend on the organization’s priorities. Before proposing either training or non-training solutions the facts, figures and feelings so far collected need to be thought through and discussed.

In an action research sense, this stage involves reflection by going back in our thoughts to consider what the experience and the data is telling us and comparing our ideas with those of others. It involves insight, feelings and intuition as well as logical deduction. It is as much a process of synthesizing information and formulating new ideas as it is of evaluating facts and figures. It is an attempt to discover not only an objective reality (assuming this is ever possible) but reality as perceived by the stakeholders.

Analysis may have uncovered various non-training needs.
opportunity in technology, in systems, in structures and in the nature of work itself.

The Action Stage
Research such as that involved in training needs analysis may be purely descriptive or, preferably, similar to action research. This means we do it to produce a response, an action, which we then observe to ascertain its effectiveness. For instance, has the original need been met and do people feel more confident about the future? Action should not be considered as the final phase in the cycle, it is what drives the whole process.

Needs analysis is a process involving consultation, investigation and reflection. What is discovered from the process must also be acted on. Training proposals will need to be considered and other people (particularly line managers) involved in order to gain the organizational commitment necessary to undertake further action. Training needs which are likely to be met through the implementation of short programmes will require the design of such programmes by training staff working collaboratively with line managers or supervisors. Similarly, a long-term HRD strategy should be developed to ensure that ongoing and future needs are confronted. The analysis may also have uncovered various non-training needs and these require different responses on the part of management. The ultimate success of a training programme may well depend on the appropriateness of these responses in addressing these other, related needs. This stage of the process involves developing specific steps to ensure the needs identified at all levels (individual, occupational and organizational) will eventually be met and actions taken evaluated in terms of their contributions to this end.

Conclusion
If training is to be integrated into the normal business activities of the organization it must be both strategically focused and collaboratively designed. Training needs analysis as a process will need to follow a model which has more in common with action research than with traditional descriptive survey research (in which the researcher remains “outside” the phenomena seeking an objective truth). Zuber-Skeerritt[11] describes four characteristics of an action research approach which distinguish it from traditional positivist models. It is:

(1) Practical. Its aim is not only to discover information but also to lead to practical improvements both during and after the investigation.

(2) Participative and collaborative. The researcher is not an outside expert studying “subjects” but a colleague working with fellow stakeholders to identify a problem and suggest a solution.

(3) Emancipatory. The approach is not hierarchical or driven by management. All people concerned contribute to the enquiry and participate as equals.

(4) Interpretive. Any solutions or subsequent decisions which result from the research will be based on the views and interpretations of the stakeholders, not on the investigator’s ideal of what should happen.

Action research is a management strategy to discover answers and analyse alternatives and is highly systematic and rigorous. While often the response to a complex problem or a difficult situation, it can also be undertaken to try out new ideas or experiment with different and hopefully better ways of doing things. Training needs analysis is concerned with determining whether training is needed and, if so, how it can be made most meaningful and effective for the people involved.

Action research is highly systematic and rigorous

Competency based training is high on the industrial agenda of most countries at the moment and this requires that we go beyond thinking only in terms of task skills to consider the real elements which constitute occupational competence and effective work performance. Ways of assessing these competences and establishing career paths to enable people to improve their competency, and hence their quality of working life, need to be clearly identified. Ways of preparing people to meet the technological demands of the future need to go beyond the standard computer training courses we offer today and which we feel are sufficient. Continuous professional development, thus far restricted to a small number of upper echelon positions, will need to be considered for everyone in employment. A reactive, problem-based approach to needs analysis and HRD planning is no longer sufficient.

Despite the economic imperatives of contemporary organizational life, working in the training and HRD
field involves more than the ability to turn a dollar. We are dealing with people and learning, with career goals and fears of the future. We need to challenge the idea that training exists solely for short-term economic reasons. The functional skills of a trainer or a human resource manager are as narrow as any other operator if they are not bedded in values, attitudes and ethics appropriate to a profession dealing with human beings as well as human resources.

References