
Needs Assessment

Why Conduct a Needs Assessment?

Every training project should begin with some form of needs assessment. Sometimes this assessment is very informal, involving a discussion with the supervisor of the training participants or the potential participants themselves. In other cases, it is more formal, involving a survey of potential trainees or a job analysis. The needs assessment plays a vital role in focusing the training on the most important topics and providing the training on the appropriate level—in short, getting the most value for the resources invested.

Training needs assessments provide valuable information to training providers, enabling them to develop and offer the courses that will be most useful to agency staff. STAPPA and ALAPCO conduct a training needs assessment survey each year to assist training providers in planning their programs — if your agency conducts its own internal needs assessment in preparation for this survey, you will be able to report more accurately the types of training that you will need.

In conducting a needs assessment, it is important to differentiate between training “needs” and training “wants” so that scarce resources can be allocated most effectively. It is also important to probe expressions of training needs to get past symptoms of problems to the problem itself. Finally, it is important to separate those problems or issues that can be addressed by training from those that cannot be addressed by training and that are, in fact, management or resource issues.

How Can Training Needs be Identified?

Some training needs can be readily identified. Training needs can arise from many events or conditions, such as:

- ✓ changes in regulations
- ✓ installation of new equipment
- ✓ new procedures or modifications of existing procedures
- ✓ hiring of new staff or creation of new job positions.

For example, all new regulations require some staff training; in fact, STAPPA and ALAPCO sent a letter to EPA requesting that all new regulations be accompanied by appropriate training at the time of promulgation.

Training needs can also be identified from problems that have arisen. If staff are unable to complete their assigned workload or if work products contain errors, there might be a need for training.

Training can also be a morale-builder in an organizations, a way that the organization can indicate to its employees that they are valued.

One approach to assessing training needs is a discussion within the sponsoring agency or organization, including supervisors of the potential trainees and the trainees themselves. This discussion should explore issues such as objectives for the training, in terms of the desired knowledge, skill, and/or attitude changes that the training is intended to effect. If problems related to job performance are the primary reason for the scheduling of the training, these should be highlighted. If the training is intended to prepare staff to understand and implement new regulations, equipment, or procedures, these should be described.

Informal discussions within the agency provide vital information but are often inadequate for a complete and accurate needs assessment. Surveys of potential trainees and their supervisors are useful in pinpointing training needs. These surveys can be conducted through telephone or face-to-face interviews or through written questionnaires. These surveys can simply ask the potential trainees what they think their needs are, or the survey can delve into the roles and responsibilities of the potential trainees, the skills that they need to fulfill these roles and responsibilities, existing levels of knowledge and skill, and the gaps between the existing and required knowledge and skill.

Job analyses can also assist in identifying training needs. The job analysis consists of a delineation of the specific tasks that are performed by staff in various positions and the knowledge and skills that are needed to perform these tasks. The job analysis can be combined with an assessment of existing knowledge and skill levels to identify the gaps.

Agency staff can be reluctant to discuss training needs if they believe that this will reflect badly on them and their capabilities — they might be afraid to admit that there are aspects of their jobs that they do not feel thoroughly competent to perform. The use of anonymous questionnaires can overcome this reluctance, although this also reduces the agency's ability to target the training to those in need. Another approach is to have a third party or neutral outsider conduct the questioning and prepare the analysis. This third party can be someone from another part of the agency or a consultant. In the best of situations, the agency will cultivate an atmosphere in which enhancement of knowledge and skills through training is viewed positively and assessments of training needs are part of normal agency routine.

The needs assessment will assist in clarifying training goals and objectives. It can also gather information on appropriate training methods. For example, it is critical to know whether the potential training audience has access to satellite downlink sites if a satellite videoconference is planned. Or, if CD-ROM or Internet training is under consideration, it is important to know whether potential trainees have access to needed equipment at their own desks.

When analyzing needs assessment results, it is crucial to be as specific as possible. While it is useful to identify broad topic areas in which training is needed, it is more useful to determine what particular aspects of the topic are most important and whether the training should be at a beginning, intermediate, or advanced level. The analysis should also indicate the different needs of various subgroups within the agency staff — inspectors, permit writers, SIP developers, and other groups might have some needs in common but also are likely to have some needs that are very specific to their jobs and responsibilities. An accurate understanding of these different needs will enable you to pinpoint those staff members who should attend various training events,

thus avoiding wasting resources and time by sending staff to training that is irrelevant or at an inappropriate level for their needs.

The forms in this section of *Tools for Trainers* can be adapted by your agency to help you assess your staff's training needs. Adoption of a training plan or career ladder for staff will also help you determine the training needs of the staff, based on a prescribed curriculum (examples of training plans and career ladders are included in a separate section of *Tools*).

Tips on Using Needs Assessment Tools

This section of *Tools for Trainers* presents samples of needs assessment interview guides and written questionnaires that can be used or adapted for use by your agency. The steps to follow in designing your needs assessment include the following:

Step 1: Establish Objectives. Why are you conducting the needs assessment? To decide how to spend training funds in the upcoming year? To focus a specific course that you have selected? To identify individual staff members' needs so that training resources can be allocated among staff appropriately? To respond to the STAPPA/ALAPCO survey? Other?

Step 2: Select an Approach. What is the best approach to achieve your objective(s) — informal discussions, surveys of potential participants, job analyses? How much can you learn from existing information — for example, if the training need will be created by a new regulation, what skills and knowledge will agency staff need to implement the new regulation? Based on the approach selected, who should be included in the respondent pool — all or a sample of the potential trainees, their supervisors?

Step 3: Develop Materials and Procedures. Look through the materials in this section of the *Tools* notebook and select formats and questions that might apply. You can take portions of various different forms or you can use a format that you like and create new questions within its framework. If you don't know how you will use the answer to a specific question, leave it out! This will keep the questionnaire short, to the point, and easy for staff to complete.

Step 4: Pretest Materials and Procedures. If possible, you should pretest your materials and procedures with a few selected respondents. This pretest will tell you if your materials will gather the information you anticipate. It will also indicate those questions that can be easily misinterpreted. It is helpful to talk with the pretest respondents after they have completed the materials to discuss their suggestions for improving the forms.

Finally, let staff know that their participation in the needs assessment mattered — show them that the training planned for the agency and for individuals was based, at least to some extent, on their feedback.