

# Training Needs Assessment: A Contradiction in Terms?

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The following simulated dialogue explores the issues surrounding the terms and concepts of "training needs assessment" and contrasts those with "needs assessment." The scene is set at Kate Brown's office at Brown and Associates. She is a highly respected human performance improvement technologist who heads a company specializing in needs assessment, quality improvement, and training. Kate has just received a phone call from a potential client:

Kate: *Hello, this is Kate Brown.*

Jim: *Hi. This is Jim Queeg, Personnel Director of Keith Industries. Kate, we have been experiencing some performance problems with our shop-floor staff. I believe we need a training needs assessment. We would like to hire you to do the assessment and then develop the required training package.*

Kate: *I'm pleased that you have selected me to help, and to make sure we get the results we want we best*

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*ask ourselves—if training is the solution, what's the problem?*

Jim: *You're the consultant, isn't a training needs assessment when you come into an organization and find out what training we need? That's what we need—an assessment prior to us giving training.*

Kate: *Jim, a training needs assessment is an oxymoron; the term is internally inconsistent. Would you mind if we go through some of the technical training jargon to ensure we are talking about the same tools, purposes, and consequences?*

Jim: *Sounds good to me.*

Kate: *When you know training is the solution, a training requirements analysis could be done based on the gaps in results (payoffs and performance) between present and desired results. By results I am talking about ends, the "what" that is to be delivered...as opposed to means, which are the processes or ways we go about achieving or delivering the ends...such as training. That is why I prefer not to use the term training needs assessment at all. It usually makes people assume a training solution.*

Jim: *I understand, but ends, means, processes; this all sounds like the Total Quality Management (TQM) training we have had. What does TQM have to do with needs assessment?*

Kate: *TQM is a process. It is one of the possible methods-means to achieve desired results. Are you with me so far?*

Jim: *Sure, keep going.*

Kate: *What are the data, opinions, or factors that make you think a training requirements analysis, what you first called a training needs assessment, may help?*

Jim: *People aren't happy with our current program of training for our initial employment personnel; that is, our new employees. The training program was developed by a panel of technical experts and it takes the people too long to complete the training. Many of our new personnel leave the company before they finish the training program. Is this what you mean by a gap?*

Kate: *Not exactly, but we are getting to it. I use gaps to describe the difference between desired and current ends—the results of your organization's training or other interventions compared to the*

desired results. I use "need" as a noun to describe that gap in results, not as something we want to do.

Jim: What are you talking about?

Kate: I'm talking about not prescribing training for all your organization's problems. I am going to fax you an article that may help you understand the concepts and terms we have been discussing. Give it a scan and then we will talk again.

A facsimile arrives at Jim's desk and he begins to read...

TERM	DEFINITION
Need	The gap between current and desired (or required) results, or (stated another way) the gap in results between "what is" and "what should be."
Needs assessment	A process to identify the needs and place them in priority order on the basis of what it costs to ignore it as compared to the value it adds to society and the organization.
Needs analysis	A process to determine the reasons and causes for a need so that appropriate interventions may be identified and later selected.
Training needs assessment	An oxymoron. A selection of the means—training—to meet the need, before determining what the need is. A more appropriate term to use for training needs assessment is training requirements analysis.
Training requirements analysis	A needs assessment and needs analysis help determine if training is the solution, or part of the solution, to meet the need. Once the "why training" is established, a training requirements analysis is conducted to determine the who, what, when, where, and how training might be best employed.

This paper explains the difference between "training needs assessment" and "needs assessment." The means by which this end will be achieved is to define the terms "training," "needs," "needs assessment," and "training needs assessment," consequently showing that the last term is an oxymoron—a contradictory juxtaposition of concepts that is too common and comfortable to the ears of human performance improvement personnel.

Rossett (1987) defines a "training needs assessment" as "a systematic study of a problem or innovation,

incorporating data and opinions from varied sources, in order to make effective decisions or recommendations about what should happen next." The definition is a sound one for a *needs assessment*. The confusion arises due to tying the concept of "training" to the definition of a needs assessment. Rossett clearly states that training may not be the solution, but the *name of the process* could lead users to training despite her caveat.

As defined by Kaufman (1994, 1996), a needs assessment is comprised of two procedural elements: (1) a "need" is a gap between current and desired results, a "needs assessment" is a process for identifying the gaps based on the differences between "what is" and "what should be" based on a combination of hard—independently verifiable—and soft—personal and private—data; (2) the identified needs are placed in priority order based on what it costs to ignore the need as compared to its impact on society and the organization. "Needs assessment" and "needs analysis" are not synonymous terms. A needs assessment is a prerequisite procedure for needs analysis; the latter process is the means to identify the causes and reasons for the need. Based on the causes and reasons, appropriate interventions—such as training, job aids, job redesign, hiring procedures—to meet the need are selected.

Nadler (1980), a father of HRD, defines training as the process of acquiring and improving the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for present job performance, the job an individual currently holds. Training, as an intervention to solve a performance problem, may take many forms, for example: interactive and hypermedia-based, experiential and discovery learning, embedded training, computer based instruction, teleconferencing, etc. Whatever the means employed, the desired end is the same: mastery and acquisition of the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities for the performance of mission and job-related tasks.

Based on these definitions of terms, a "training needs assessment" would be the process of determining the training requirements for bridging the gap between what is and what should be. It is likely a premature selection of training that is based on the fact that a performance gap is going to be solved via a pre-selected intervention—training. This might close off any other performance solving interventions, such as ergonomics, personnel selection, compensation, feedback, incentives, culture change, organizational redesign, or a myriad of other programs, systems, and tactics used to solve performance problems (Rosenberg, 1990). Thus, "training needs assessment" is an oxymoron. Training indicates a solution—a means, not an end. Needs assessment is a process for determining the gaps in results, or ends, so an effective and efficient solution may be selected. Why go through the process of needs assessment if the decision as to a solution—

training—has already been made? A more accurate term for “training needs assessment” is “training requirements analysis.” In this fashion, “training needs assessment” can be moved out of the oxymoron league of items such as civil service, giant shrimp, and healthy potato chip.

A needs assessment located within a training context may be fundamentally flawed. A training process, such as the classic instructional systems design ADDIE model (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate) is a systematic method for improving skills, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities through training solutions **once the requirement for training is established**. However, ADDIE begins with analysis, not assessment. How does the training department know what to analyze? By locating the needs assessment process within a training context, the assessment is slanted toward identifying performance gaps for training solutions. The gap between “what is” and “what should be” in terms of results may be skewed toward a training solution. This yields a “training requirements analysis” and a training intervention before we can really justify a training solution. Valid, useful needs assessment and needs analysis processes should be free from training’s “most favored solution status.”

Experience has shown that a training intervention is only required in one out of five performance problems—this figure is corroborated by W. Edward Deming’s anecdotal modification of the Pareto Principle that 80% of all quality problems are not due to a lack of knowledge or skills (Clark, 1994), and Spitzer’s observation that at least 80% of the performance problems he has encountered in his career could not be solved by instruction of any kind (Spitzer, 1990). Since a performance intervention will, more often than not, require non-training solutions, it is risky to have a needs assessment within a training context. To slant a needs assessment toward a training solution, then, is likely wrong at least 80% of the time!

Useful needs assessment and needs analyses should be free from training bias. The needs assessment process, in particular, should ensure that the identified gaps in results are free from *how* the need will be met (such as training, computers, technology) or the resources that will be used to meet the need (such as personnel, time, money, equipment). The freedom from bias that distinguishes a useful needs assessment process is not inherent to a training requirements analysis or any needs analysis that resides in a context geared towards a particular intervention.

According to Rossett, performance technology (PT) is a systematic approach aimed at solving human performance problems by linking the solution to business results; that is, it aims to achieve business and organizational results through tactics that improve and align organizational performance (1991). Its approach

is systematic: It is an ordered, sequential data-driven process that establishes relationships between steps.

PT also uses non-training interventions to solve problems drawn from many disciplines, such as communications, psychology, and anthropology. Rossett (1995) notes that the most common non-training interventions are job aids, technology, organizational development, and information technology. The variety of non-training interventions are unknown to the majority of people in the work place; these people see performance problems as being solved by training and react to a performance problem with the familiar cry of “we need training!” Thus, training is prematurely selected as a solution even if it is not the most efficient or effective intervention. Furthermore, training is an intervention with which most people are comfortable; it fits a known paradigm. The terms “training needs assessment” and “training needs analysis” help perpetuate the fallacy that training is the best choice to resolve performance problems in all situations. As a major step toward the termination of this destructive notion and general enlightenment to non-training interventions, the term “training needs assessment” might be stricken from the register of acceptable terms; and called a “training requirements analysis” or “training intervention selection”; that is, conducted *after* training has been selected and justified.

...After reading the fax, Jim contacts Kate and the telephone conversation resumes...

Jim: *I’ve just read the article you sent to me and I’m beginning to see the light. But let me clarify a few points.*

Kate: *Sure, fire away!*

Jim: *So a valid and useful needs assessment doesn’t assume training is the solution?*

Kate: *Yes and the desired results for our needs assessment are rolled down from the Ideal Vision, which is the view an organization has of the world we want to leave for our grandchildren. Organizations, including Keith Industries, should care about and commit to deliver results to achieve the Ideal Vision.*

Jim: *Let’s see if I understand; an assessment starting with the societal outcomes—or what you call an Ideal Vision—is the place to start a needs assessment. But, I’m not interested in any academic, esoteric type of work that is motivated by utopian ideals. I want **results**.*

Kate: *I am all for results, Jim, and if I can have some more of your time, I can explain how all this relates*

back to your situation and future success. You should be aware that it is becoming increasingly understood in management circles that the extent to which organizational purposes are identical to social purposes is the extent to which an organization is likely to be successful.

Jim: *This is getting interesting, keep going...*

Kate: *Jim, as part of total quality management, each division at Keith Industries developed a vision statement, which was combined to form a mission statement for the company. The Ideal Vision is really a level above this and serves as the starting point for our planning.*

Jim: *Why do I care about the world and this Ideal Vision?*

Kate: *Look, the world is what we leave to our grandchildren—they are our future. If you don't care about their future, who will? Besides, the clients of Keith Industries "live" as do all its neighbors in our world.*

Jim: *OK, I care about my grandchildren and, hence, the world. So tell me, how does this Ideal Vision stuff work?*

Kate: *We bring together the key planning partners from inside and outside the organization.*

Jim: *Including our customers?*

Kate: *Yes, they would be partners. I would also include many others such as spouses, taxpayers, and other members of the public; the wider the base the more commitment you'll get to the Ideal Vision.*

Jim: *Commitment, customer, empowerment! Enough, I am getting really uncomfortable with this.*

Kate: *Jim, it is all right to be uncomfortable; remember the paradigms shifting from the Joel Barker video in the TQM training?*

Jim: *Yes, I do—it caused me a considerable amount of discomfort!*

Kate: *You are on the verge of a personal paradigm shift. If you make the shift, I guarantee you will be safe from reactive "training needs assessment," and start to proactively create the future. Unless, of course, you can predict the future.*

Jim: *No, my name is not Nostradamus!*

Kate: *Peter Drucker, your CEO's favorite person to quote, says that if you can't predict the future, then create it. Strategic Planning Plus is proactive and begins with the Ideal Vision to create the future. Consequently, we start by assessing the needs at the societal level or what we call the Mega Level.*

Jim: *The gaps are based on results, right?*

Kate: *Right, the difference in results between what is and what should or could be is the beginning of our needs assessment; the method of identifying the needs and placing them in priority order based on the cost to ignore it. The needs analysis follows and deals with identifying the reasons or causes for the gaps that we chose to close in the needs assessment. Are you beginning to see the connection between society, Keith Industries, and the needs assessment?*

Jim: *I think so.*

Kate: *OK, from the Ideal Vision, we pick out the pieces that we, as an organization, commit to do something about. We describe the **what could be** in measurable terms. Our typical mission statement plus performance measurement criteria creates our mission objective.*

Jim: *And the measurement helps us know if we achieved our objective.*

Kate: *That is right. The mission objective deals with the direction for our organization's outputs at the Macro level...and by looking at needs we can see if we are continuously improving toward the Ideal Vision.*

Jim: *Hold the phone, Macro is what?*

Kate: *Macro deals with organizational results, the contributions Keith Industries makes for its external clients and society.*

Jim: *OK, Mega equals society, Macro equals organization, what else?*

Kate: *Micro is the products of the systems of the organization. Processes are how we get the results and inputs are our raw materials. Do you now see that we have three level of results—societal, organizational, and building block results—and we can do needs assessment at each of these levels? Of course, your performance problems you called about are at the micro level, but we could make certain our performance improvement there will contribute to organizational and societal results.*

Jim: *It's sort of making sense, but tell me more.*

Kate: *When a needs assessment is only about results then we can define what it is we really want to accomplish without prescribing training before we know training is the appropriate solution.*

Jim: *This is beginning to make sense, but I need,—OOPS—I mean, I should look into this issue in greater detail. Thanks for you help. I'll contact you next week about tackling our performance problem.*

Kate: *Great, don't forget Kaufman's book **Strategic Thinking**. It will provide you with the details you are looking for and the fax has a simple table of terms to assist your understanding of assessment and analysis.*

**In conclusion.** A "training needs assessment" is an oxymoron. Though the most popular definition of "training needs assessment" does not prescribe training as **the** solution, it is clearly shrouded in warnings that training may not be the solution. It is misleading to use "training" in the title if it is not part of the effective and efficient solution 80% of the time. We recommend the use of the terms "needs assessment," which should be followed by a "needs analysis." We encourage human performance improvement professionals to: (1) steer clear of the term "training needs assessment"; (2) not confuse "needs" with "wants"; and (3) differentiate between "ends" and "means." □

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## Book on Constructivist Learning

*Constructivist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design*, edited by Brent G. Wilson, priced at \$37.95 hardcover, may be ordered from Educational Technology Publications, 700 Palisade Avenue, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632; 201-871-4007; fax: 201-871-4009; toll-free in the USA and CANADA: 1-800-952-BOOK.

This important book, portions of which appeared in a previous issue of this magazine, discusses the design and application of constructivist learning environments of three general kinds: computer-based microworlds, classroom-based settings, and open or virtual learning environments.

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## Comments/Suggestions?

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