

# Training: It's Not Always the Answer

by **Bill Stetar**

It's a scene repeated often: A manager or an HR specialist sits down with a training provider, perhaps a representative from a local college or a salesperson from a commercial training firm, to review a list of courses and determine which ones the department wants to sponsor. A departmental training plan, or at least a good portion of it, gets mapped out in less than a day.

OK, maybe the training needs analysis doesn't happen exactly like that. Maybe the manager talks

with a few supervisors or circulates a memo asking supervisors to rank the importance of the courses listed. Maybe it takes more than a few days to hatch the final training plan.

This scenario may be exaggerated, but only slightly. One thing is certain: The approach is off the mark. It's not a needs analysis—it's a wants analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Employers do not necessarily need well-trained employees. I know that may sound like heresy coming from someone employed in higher education, but what employers truly need are employees who perform well. Training is one way to attain desired performance, but it's not the only way. When you corroborate expectations in terms of performance, you'll be able to choose effective training and non-training responses.

Compared to previous standards, the ISO/TS 16949 automotive standard places more emphasis on the process of the training needs analysis. Section 6.2.2.2, training, says, "The organization shall establish and maintain documented procedures for identifying training needs and achieving competence of all personnel performing activities affecting product quality. Personnel performing specific assigned tasks shall be qualified, as required, with particular attention to the satisfaction of customer requirements."<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on process and competence benefits the entire automotive supply chain. Meeting this standard requires an organization to improve its

## In 50 Words Or Less

- **Training is one way to attain desired performance, but it's not the only way.**
- **The first step in any training needs analysis is to differentiate between training wants and true training needs by examining the current state of performance and defining the desired state of performance.**



methods of analyzing training needs. Fortunately, the automotive industry can capitalize on an existing body of knowledge to jumpstart compliance efforts.

### **Where To Start**

So how should you start a training needs analysis? First, drop the word “training” because it injects bias into a systematic approach that, by its very nature, is evidentiary. You’ve heard the saying, “To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Likewise, a needs analysis conducted with a training prejudice typically confirms what one suspects: Training is needed.

A needs analysis examines the current state of performance and defines the desired state of performance. In a needs analysis, the wants are the desired outcomes. What do you want to see or have happening? The gap between the desired and current state characterizes your needs.

A popular myth is that training is good. Training may be what the decision makers want, but it may not be needed to improve employees’ competency. Consider this example: Several years ago a major manufacturer decided to increase its design engineer complement by hiring 30 to 40 new college graduates. The managers were anxious to implement a training program for the new hires, and they asked for my company’s assistance.

The managers envisioned a series of seminars, lectures and similar formal learning experiences

for the new employees, but we persuaded them to let us do some front-end analysis before committing to any particular tactics. To help uncover the organization’s core training need, we interviewed section managers. One question we asked was, “What do you expect a new engineer to be able to do within the first six months on the job?” Dozens of tasks emerged from these interviews, and in short time, we were able to build a list of tasks the new hires would be expected to perform.

Additional analysis revealed most of these tasks, such as initiating an Underwriters Laboratory listing or setting up a design test, could be learned without formal classroom instruction. We worked closely with the managers and other subject matter experts to design an intervention that would help new hires learn what their managers needed them to learn.

The final product included a packaged set of user friendly, task specific how-to instructions and supplementary self-help information. The IT department put the materials online, and the new employees were encouraged to use the data at any time.

This performance support solution proved a viable, cost effective alternative to training in the classical sense. The new hires got up to speed faster than expected, made fewer mistakes and spent more time working and less time in the classroom. The managers, meanwhile, could concentrate on coaching and developing the new employees instead of

tutoring them on how to accomplish fundamental, important tasks.

### A Performance Centered Approach

The idea of needs analysis centered on performance is not new. That awareness emerged decades ago when branches of the U.S. armed forces funded extensive research, studies and pilot programs to determine how to train service personnel more effectively. Many of the advances in a systems approach to training are a result of these seminal efforts.

In particular, the U.S. Air Force led the way in developing a detailed handbook on what the military branded as the instructional systems design (ISD) approach, which was first introduced in the mid-1960s. Most contemporary training needs analysis models are rooted in the ISD structure. Influential ISD practitioners realized training solutions couldn't resolve some of the problems they were being asked to fix. Consequently, they began to promote a proactive, organizational approach to uncovering both training and non-training needs.

The ISD model evolved from its original linear form to its current circular shape (see Figure 1) in the mid-1990s. Evaluation is the nucleus of the present day ISD model, and analysis precedes all other actions, including design, development and implementation. Quality assurance and quality

improvement represent the target impact. After all, continuous improvement, not continuous training, is what we seek.

The Air Force now considers training needs analysis, or training needs assessment (TNA), as the preferred method for resolving human performance problems. Air Force protocol says TNA encompasses all analysis activities used to examine and comprehend performance problems. A TNA study, the Air Force concludes, not only determines where performance gaps exist, but also identifies the root cause and offers viable solutions.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) used the Air Force's work as a catalyst for its ISD guide. The DOE addresses the need vs. want dilemma and reminds us a perceived need is not equivalent to an analytically determined training need. The department states an effective TNA avoids developing expensive training that does not address true needs. The DOE reaffirms needs analysis can pinpoint solutions to performance problems other than training.<sup>4</sup>

For example, IBM now begins its instructional design process by defining desired business results, not by establishing course objectives or topics, because internal studies showed some of its most popular courses were producing a negative return on investment (see Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> Those courses, though well designed and well intentioned, had a detrimental impact because they covered skills and knowledge not allied with producing business results. IBM spends about \$750 million annually on learning initiatives, so it insists these activities be linked to its core strategy to win and grow customers in a competitive marketplace.<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 1** Instructional Systems Development (ISD) Model



Source: U.S. Air Force Handbook 36-2235, Vol. 6.

### State the Problem; Clarify Expected Results

Needs analysis starts with defining the desired impact and accepting the limitations of training. Training effectively addresses skill deficiencies—the types of things people can't do—but it is mostly ineffective in changing behavior toward things people won't do, many of which involve motivation, consequences and similar circumstances. Needs analysis, therefore, must differentiate undesired performances rooted in skill deficiencies from other performance issues challenging the organization.<sup>7</sup>

Allison Rossett, a professor at San Diego State University, literally wrote the book on how to con-







performance, and proper planning produces proper performance. Needs analysis is not spontaneous; it requires a well-defined execution strategy.

A proper plan responds to the conditions prompting investigation of areas such as the nature of the work, the types of jobs, processes or business involved, the manifestation of problems, customer impact and the severity of the problems. The plan plots specific data collection strategies, typically incorporating direct observations, questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus groups and tests into the fact finding process. Human performance gaps typically span several organizational disciplines and units, so it is essential to look at the situation through a wide lens.

## Intelligence Gathering

A needs analysis will help improve employee performance, not deliver better training or prescribe training that someone—the employer or employee—wants. Needs analyses must help define organizational needs in context of performance, not merely provide a point and click menu of popular solutions.

A performance centered needs analysis provides a pathway to resolve performance issues and extract optimal value from training dollars. Tantamount to developing a high performance organization, needs analysis is the crux of proactive, ROI based human capital management.

Think of needs analysis as intelligence gathering. The auto industry aggressively spends billions of dollars gathering external data on market statistics, consumer information and competitive analysis, yet a systematic needs analysis represents a wide open opportunity to gain valuable internal intelligence—data to help make the human side of the business more efficient, effective and competent.

Today's organizations cannot afford to miss the target on this activity. Get it wrong and they will generate wasted effort, misappropriated funding, ineffective training and, eventually, eroded organizational performance. Once that happens, loss of customer satisfaction and loyalty are not too far behind. Get it right, though, and customer satisfaction will likely follow.

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