

4 IDENTIFYING LEARNING NEEDS IN ORGANISATIONS

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4 IDENTIFYING LEARNING NEEDS IN ORGANISATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

'Learning is a necessary process for achieving business objectives and essential to improving organisational performance. It bridges the gap between the organisation's current capability and that needed to deliver the business results. From an individual point of view, it enables people to add to their stock of personal competences and develop their full potential.'

This statement from the Inland Revenue policy for learning called 'Learning Directions' sums up why all organisations, whatever their size, should be investing time and money in developing their people. Effective learning is an essential component of business strategy.

Major business investments are targeted, prioritised, planned, monitored and managed to ensure the best possible return on the investment. Learning should be no different. In most organisations, the amount spent on training is a significant business investment. The training and development the organisation needs to achieve its business goals must be effectively identified and prioritised. Organisations are beginning to realise that efficiently managing the training budget does not guarantee the money is being well spent.

The organisation needs to ensure that the identification and development of skills, knowledge and abilities is robust and cost-effective.

Identifying and prioritising the critical learning needs is the purpose of a learning needs analysis. Implementing a structured learning needs analysis need not be a complicated process. This chapter describes a few standard approaches that can be modified and tailored to the specific needs of the organisation.

Learning needs analysis should be a continuous process for all organisations. Listening to colleagues, assessing capability and performance, maintaining awareness of business activities, looking out for competitor activity or changes in the market place are all legitimate activities. The learning needs analysis should also include constantly monitoring and reviewing the impact of the current training and development activities. These sorts of activities can ensure the constantly evolving and emerging learning needs will be efficiently and promptly identified.

Alongside this continuous activity there will be, from time to time, the need for more formal learning needs analysis processes. These occasions include

major organisational restructuring or part of a new business strategy. Most of this chapter will be concerned with these formal processes but many of the techniques discussed can be applied in less formal situations.

Learning is more than training

The term 'learning need' is used in this chapter rather than 'training need' because many organisations now recognise that the breadth of needs cannot be met just by sending employees on training courses. Training has often been narrowly associated with just attending courses and training needs analysis with matching people to appropriate training courses.

Learning is what happens after the person has received the training and is much more self-directed. Learning takes place when the person is able to apply the new knowledge or skills to their own work-based situation.

The 2006 CIPD learning and development survey found that the traditional formal training course is becoming less dominant. Fifty-six per cent of the organisations responding to the survey now reporting that 'on-the-job training' is the most effective way for people to learn.

There is evidence in many people development strategies of a progressive shift from the delivery of content to the development of learning capabilities. Therefore, it is appropriate that this chapter concentrates on the wider analysis of 'learning needs' rather than just 'training' needs.

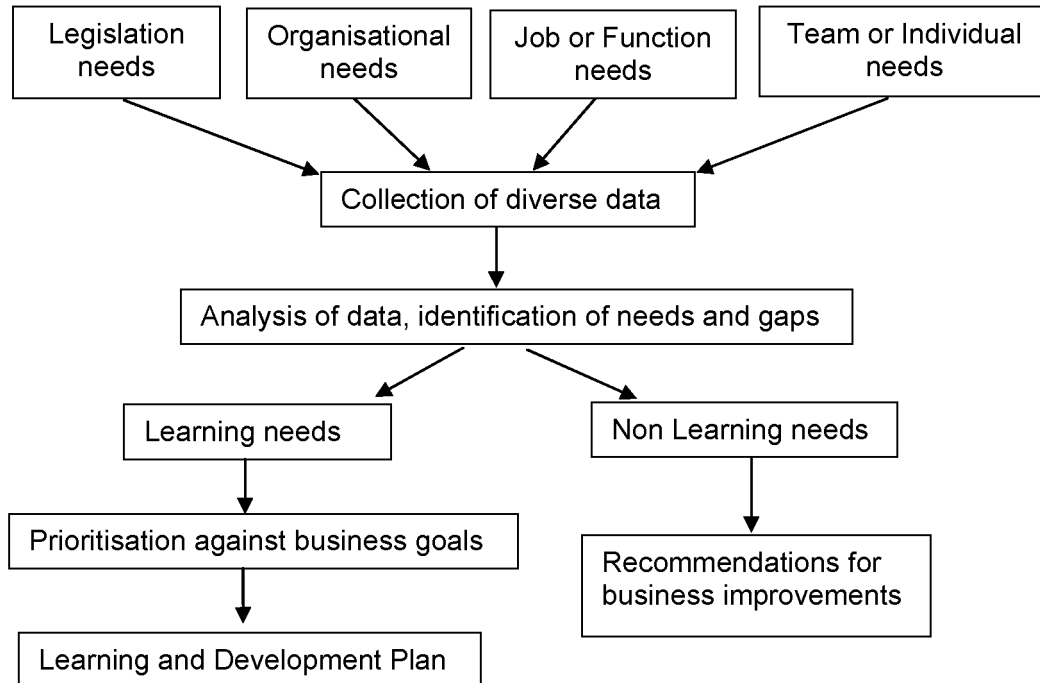
A learning need is where a gap is identified between the current level of performance and a required level of performance. This 'required level' could be of two types; where performance has fallen below or not yet reached a satisfactory standard, or where a new standard of performance is required.

Learning needs are normally defined at one of three levels:

- An organisational need as a result of new legislative requirements, technological development, or major restructuring
- A group or job need as a result of changing requirements or new specifications
- An individual need due to sub-standard performance or, when starting a new job, a transfer, promotion or secondment requiring new skills.

Figure 4.1 shows these interrelationships.

Figure 4.1: Learning needs analysis process



4.2 BEFORE STARTING A LEARNING NEEDS ANALYSIS

For clarity and simplicity we are using the term 'learning and development manager' as a general description for a wide range of roles and job titles that may be given the responsibility of carrying out a learning needs analysis within organisations.

There are three major elements in preparing for a learning needs analysis. The elements that need to be considered are:

- The capabilities required to carry out the analysis
- The needs of the stakeholder groups
- The scale and scope of the analysis.

These three elements will be described separately but in practice they will emerge through an iterative process. The limitations of the learning and development department may restrict the scope of the analysis. The needs of

the stakeholders may require extra resources to meet them. The scope of the analysis may determine which stakeholders are approached and so on.

4.2.1 Capabilities

The first consideration for the learning and development manager is, do they or their department have the skills and capabilities required to carry out the analysis?

Capability may include a specified time scale over which the analysis must be done or a limit to how much time can be spent. Alternatively, there might be a budgetary limit or restriction on how much can be spent or how many people can be involved. The learning and development manager will need to be clear on these factors before starting to ensure it is not beyond their capability.

As well as clarifying the quantity of resources available the learning and development manager will need to identify the skills required and ensure there are people available with those skills.

These skills fall into three categories:

- **Process skills** – The ability to make plans, manage time, set targets, review progress etc.
- **People skills** – The ability to start, build and maintain appropriate supportive relationships at all levels.
- **Content skills** – The ability to collect, record and analyse data using a variety of appropriate tools and techniques.

The learning and development manager will need to call on these skills in various combinations throughout the analysis.

4.2.2 Stakeholder groups

Although the learning and development department is usually the one that carries out the learning needs analysis they are not the only, or even the prime, customer. There are a number of interested parties or stakeholders that need to be considered before, during and after a learning needs analysis.

These stakeholder groups include:

- Senior managers/directors and strategic decision makers

- Middle and junior line managers
- Human Resources colleagues, training managers and budget holders
- Employees both directly and indirectly involved in the analysis
- Union representatives
- Internal and external customers, clients and suppliers
- Professional institutes and government departments.

Before starting the analysis, the learning and development manager should take into account the views and requirements of as many of these stakeholder groups as possible.

The sort of questions to be asking these stakeholder groups might include:

- What results or outcomes do you expect and need from this analysis?
- How involved with the analysis would you like, or need to be?
- What feedback will you need or expect?
- Do you have any concerns or requirements I need to know before I start that may affect the approach?

The answers to these questions will be diverse, considering the different needs of these stakeholder groups.

Considering each stakeholder group in turn:

Senior management/directors

This group will be the one setting the strategic direction for the business, which the learning needs analysis will be supporting. It is therefore vital that their views are taken into consideration. Without a clear understanding of the strategic direction the Learning and Development manager should not start the analysis (see **Chapter 2 Creating a Learning and Development Strategy**).

This group will be mainly interested in future significant capability gaps and how these are to be filled. Time scales for deployment and cost and resource forecasts will also be of interest as they will probably have to approve the budget.

Middle and junior line managers

Managers at this level are predominantly interested in converting the strategic direction into tactical short-term objectives. Therefore, they will be particularly interested in how the learning needs analysis can assist them in achieving their business objectives. Their hands-on experience will be very useful in identifying practical helps and hinders, who are the experts and where the problem areas or individuals are likely to be found.

The first line manager and supervisors will have an added interest in the analysis as their own competence is likely to be assessed and their staff will be directly affected by the process. Line managers are often the prime source of learning needs information through the appraisal and performance review process.

Employees

Clear and timely communication is the key requirement for the employees. They need to know what is happening and how it will affect them both during and after the analysis. Useful information from the employees will include exactly how the business processes really work, bottlenecks and frustrations with the working practices. Self-assessment by the employees is a significant source of information for identifying learning needs.

Union representatives

Where a union is involved, its prime concern is the protection and welfare of its members. As with the employees, honest and clear communication as early as possible will be their first requirement. The subject of potential job losses, higher productivity targets and extra pressures on their members will be foremost in their mind. The more reassurance the learning and development manager can give, the more co-operative the union representatives will be with the process. Unions will always be in support of the continual skills development of their members.

Customers, clients and suppliers

These groups can be a good source of useful information on product and service quality, reliability and other performance parameters. Their requirement will mainly be the continuous improvement in the products and services they receive and reassurance that the actual learning needs analysis

will not disrupt this in any way. Surveys of these stakeholder groups will provide valuable information for a needs analysis.

Human Resources colleagues

Colleagues in the various HR departments can be a good source of information on such items as demographic changes, training states and records, evaluation of past training events, recruitment forecasts, staff surveys, 360-degree feedback processes, appraisals and personal learning plans etc. All this information will be of value during the analysis.

The HR department may also be able to provide resources to help with the analysis. They will be very interested in the output of the analysis to help with future recruitment, job specifications, designing new training courses and forecasting training budgets etc.

Institutes and government departments

These stakeholder groups may also need to be considered before undertaking a learning needs analysis. Most organisations are affected by government legislation to one degree or another. Some of this legislation will have to be taken into account. Health and safety is an obvious area where organisations have a legal obligation to ensure their employees are fully trained. Areas such as equal opportunities, diversity, discrimination and exclusivity will also have to be considered throughout the process.

Organisations employing groups of professionals may also have to consider their professional needs. Institute membership at the appropriate grade will involve a quantity of continual professional development (CPD) and may include passing sets of exams to achieve professional status. The learning and development manager will need to be aware of these professional needs and include them as appropriate in the analysis.

4.2.3 Scoping the analysis

Having confirmed the required skills are available and identified all the requirements of the various stakeholder groups, the next step in the preparation is to define the scope of the analysis. This will clarify what is to be included and what is to be left out of the process.

Typical questions to be asked at this stage include:

- What is the main purpose of the analysis?

- What are the main areas to be covered?
- What information will be needed?
- Who are the main people to be directly involved?
- Which divisions, departments, locations will need to be visited?
- How much time can be devoted to this and when has it got to be finished?
- What tools and techniques are likely to be needed and do we have the expertise to use them effectively?

Having clarified what resources and capabilities are available, what the needs of the stakeholder groups are and scoped out the breadth and depth of the analysis, the learning and development manager should be ready to start.

4.3 PLANNING A LEARNING NEEDS ANALYSIS

'Organisations need to introduce steps to support, accelerate and direct learning interventions which meet organisational needs and are appropriate to the learner and the context. Only then can organisations reap the full benefits of self-directed learning and development, such as increased motivation, better retention and improved skills.' (Martyn Sloman, CIPD Learning and Development Advisor)

A systematic approach to learning needs analysis will enable organisations to:

- identify what skills and abilities employees already have
- identify what skills and abilities are required but are not available
- identify what current training and development opportunities are available
- identify gaps in the current training and development options
- identify what new learning and development is required to address the gaps
- raise the profile of the learning and development department
- increase the attractiveness of the organisation to higher quality new recruits
- increase retention of quality, motivated people

- increase the sense of ownership and involvement of employees in their own learning and development
- build a firm foundation for the evaluation of learning activities
- place management at the centre of identifying the requirements of their own people
- maximise the effectiveness of the training and development budget.

4.3.1 Identify levels of learning needs

At its simplest, identifying learning needs is done at one or more of three levels – the organisation, specific jobs or roles and individual employees. However, the organisation often has external factors to consider and therefore the organisational level of analysis may include a separate focus on legislation and regulatory requirements.

These four levels can be summarised as:

- **Legislative requirements.** What legal imperatives or regulatory requirements are relevant to the industry? Is there any new legislation going through the UK or European parliaments that will have an impact?
- **Organisational needs.** What capabilities are needed to enable the organisation to deliver its customer promise now and in the future?
- **Job or group needs.** What are the capabilities required to carry out a specific job, or group of jobs, in the organisation?
- **Individual or team needs.** What personal capability does each employee, or team, need to do their job effectively and what new skills will they need to develop for the future?

Figure 4.2 shows how each of these levels has a distinctly separate focus and corresponding sources of data. All these sources will be explored in more detail in this chapter.

Figure 4.2: Levels of analysis

Level of analysis	Focus of the analysis	Sources of data
Level 1: Legislative needs (meeting the legal requirements)	Statutory requirements Legislation current and planned in the UK and Europe Regulatory requirements Standards	Government publications Investors in People (IIP) European Quality Award Training and Enterprise councils Training records
Level 2: Organisational needs (raising the performance of the whole organisation)	Whole organisations' business goals Organisational climate Future market place changes and trends Current capability of the people in quantity, range and variety Current levels of performance	Manpower or staffing plan and future forecasts Skills and knowledge audit of all the people Capability requirements of new technology or structural changes Productivity and efficiency indicators, balanced scorecard Business plans and strategies Organisational climate/employee satisfaction surveys Customer or client feedback and reviews Internal requests from staff and managers Evaluation of current training
Level 3: Job needs (raising the performance of groups of people with the same job)	Range of jobs or groups of jobs Tasks needed with required standard of performance Skills, knowledge and attitudes required Professional qualifications	Job descriptions and person specifications Objectives, standards and targets Tactical priorities and objectives Observations or shadowing Expert interviews or focus groups Customer or client feedback Professional institute membership
Level 4: Individual needs (raising the performance of small teams or individuals)	Profile of person in terms of their skills, knowledge and attitude Standard required of person to perform tasks to required level Career and promotions	Performance or annual appraisal Personal Development Plans Observations and shadowing Interviews and questionnaires with individual and their manager Customer or client feedback

4.3.2 Links to the business strategy

The most thorough learning needs analysis will be a complete waste of time if it does not analyse the right things. One of the most important tasks of the learning and development manager is to ensure that all the employee

learning and development activities support and directly link to the business strategy. To achieve this, the manager needs to be able to:

- identify the key stakeholders and involve them in shaping the learning and development strategy
- identify the current and future business priorities
- turn these business priorities into appropriate learning needs.

Stakeholder groups were discussed in the 'preparation' part of this chapter. At the 2006 CIPD HRD conference, Siobhan Sheridan, head of resource and capability at Capital One Bank, agreed that any evaluation of training should focus on real benefits delivered to a business.

'Our customers do need to ensure that they are contributing to training so that they get the best value out of it that they possibly can. But we talk with our key stakeholders to find out what data is important to them.'

Turning the business needs into learning needs is the final part of the analysis and will be discussed later. This section is concerned with identifying business priorities.

The CIPD 2006 learning and development survey found that 85% of UK organisations believe training is now more geared to meeting strategic business needs.

4.3.3 Getting a seat at the strategy table

The learning and development manager should ideally be an integral part of, or have access to, developing business strategy. For many organisations this can be a challenge. Business managers can be ambivalent to learning and development managers where they are considered part of the HR department, which can be seen as an internal 'police force' telling managers what they can and cannot do. Some line managers see training as a 'shopping list' from which to pick courses as a reward for their people. They do not see training as an enabler to help them achieve business results. Training is often seen as a cost or a drain of resources for the business. There is sometimes no appreciation that training can be cost effective and improve the profitability of the organisation.

Having said that the line managers do not always appreciate the strategic use of learning and development, learning and development managers could do more to help themselves. Many individuals in learning and development departments do not see themselves as part of the business, but rather as an

internal service provider on the receiving end of business strategy discussions. Some learning and development specialists do not believe they need to understand how their organisation functions, how it makes a profit or what the major competitors and business challenges are. They make no effort to understand the language of their business or its major drivers.

In order to be heard and to be accepted it is very important that learning and development professionals make every effort to understand and be able to use the business language of their line colleagues and internal customers. Learning and development professionals must become more proactive in seeking to join the strategic debate and showing how their expertise can contribute directly to support the achievement of business goals.

4.3.4 Strategic learning and development plan

The learning needs analysis should be an integral part of a comprehensive learning and development strategic plan, built from the business plan. Showing clearly how learning and development can align with and support the business goals will gain the support of senior management. This senior management support is critical to gain the required funding for a learning needs analysis and to champion the learning initiatives through the organisation.

The 2006 CIPD learning and development survey revealed that 41% of organisations believe they face a worsening economic situation. The survey also found what appears to be a corresponding impact on training budgets with a third of organisations reporting cuts and a fall of 23% in the average spend on employee learning development. In these circumstances the challenge for many learning and development managers is to justify the expense and prove the benefits of their training programmes and other learning interventions. The manager needs to question his/her own motivation when producing a strategic plan. It is important the manager does not simply do what he/she has done before, or what they like doing, or what the employees say they would like. While these sorts of learning interventions may be helpful they are probably not the most effective use of organisations' limited resources.

A thorough learning needs analysis will ensure the resulting learning interventions are fully in support of business needs. However, many learning and development departments find it difficult to prove the impact their training has had on a business performance indicator. The ability to prove this link to business goals is fundamentally dependent on the accuracy and thoroughness of the original learning needs analysis.

This focus on showing you are doing more with less and proving the added value of the interventions is normally done through some form of evaluation (See **Chapter 6 Assessment and Evaluation**).

The 2006 CIPD Learning and Development survey found mixed results when asking specific questions about how training and development efforts support business strategies. There are some positive signs with 60% believing their learning and training departments have increased their credibility. But 67% felt that following major change initiatives the training and development activities are not adequate, with nearly half only involving learning and development professionals at the final stages of major change initiatives.

There is evidence that business strategies often fail because the right capabilities were not in place at the right time. This puts two key requirements on the learning needs analysis:

- accuracy in identifying the right capabilities needed to achieve the strategic intent
- timeliness of delivering the learning intervention to meet the strategic needs.

Demonstrating strategic alignment can be done in several ways. Organisations often develop SWOT or PESTLE analyses as part of their strategy development. An alternative strategic analysis tool is the Performing strength–weakness analysis matrix. This matrix is built up of the key drivers of performance in the organisation rated for their contribution to current performance.

The analysis of these metrics will help identify important priority areas for action (see **Figure 4.3**).

Figure 4.3: Performing strength-weakness analysis matrix

Key factors	PERFORMANCE					IMPORTANCE		
	Major Strength	Minor Strength	Neutral	Minor Weakness	Major Weakness	High	Med	Low
Organisation								
Visionary leadership								
Capable employees								
Finance								
Cash flow								

Financial stability								
Marketing								
Brand Image								
Customer satisfaction								
Service quality								
Distribution effectiveness								
Manufacturing								
Economies of scale								
Capacity								
Produce on time								

Using the output of the appropriate strategic analysis tool as an input to the learning needs analysis can be an effective way of showing how it directly supports the business. Addressing these important performance improvement areas will be well received by strategic leaders.

A strategic learning and development plan should include reference to a number of fundamental values, policies and processes. These will have to be taken into account when designing the learning needs analysis. Such values and policies will include:

The mission, vision and values of the organisation

- The learning and development plan will need to ensure the learning needs analysis takes into account the mission, vision and values of the organisation.
- The learning and development manager will need to consider which of these need reinforcement, exploration or understanding through learning events.
- The organisation may make a strategic decision to ensure all employees attend a learning event to enable them to live these values in their working activities. As an example of this approach: The Chief Executive of Royal Mail took a strategic decision that every training course must positively support the four core values of the organisation. To confirm this had been done the training department were required to provide evidence of how the four values were being applied to each course.

The general principles, policies and beliefs the organisation has about their people and their development

- The learning and development manager will need to know how the organisation manages its learning and how it grows teams and individuals. They need to know what kind of learning culture the organisation has. Does it consider itself to be a learning organisation? Does it believe in self development? Does it believe in developing potential? The organisation's stance on these beliefs will have a significant influence on the learning needs analysis.
- Within the training policies will be the organisation's approach to identifying training needs. Is it based on a careful analysis of organisational needs, best practice and relevant law?
- Who is eligible for training – new recruits, those recently or about to be promoted or transferred, those facing redundancy, members of designated training schemes, managers, supervisors, or all employees?
- What type of training is available and on what basis (job-related only, career-related, company-related or general, paid for wholly by the company or partly or wholly by the employee, conducted wholly or partly in company time or the employee's own time etc)?
- Other training policies and processes relevant to the learning needs analysis include: qualifications, compliance, appraisal, potential identification, succession planning and personal development plans.
- These principles and policies will also determine the responsibility of line managers, individuals and learning and development professionals in the identification of learning needs.

Once these values, policies and processes have been defined and communicated the learning and development manager can move to the next level of analysis. This should start by identifying the needs for learning at the organisational level.

4.4 ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL ANALYSIS

Every organisation has a core set of knowledge and skills required to carry out its business activities. Developing and maintaining these core competencies is essential for the organisation to survive. A basic requirement of the learning and development department is a core portfolio of learning interventions designed to maintain and enhance these competencies.

Identifying organisational needs generally falls in to two categories:

- **Compliance and statutory** – Legislative requirements imposed from outside the organisation
- **Business strategies and goals** – Strategic choices made by internal decision makers.

4.4.1 Compliance and statutory requirements

There appears to be an ever-increasing quantity of legislation affecting organisations. These include health and safety, financial regulation, equal opportunities, diversity, discrimination etc. These are coming from the European Union as well as the UK government and from other statutory bodies. The learning and development manager will need to ensure they are up to date with all current relevant legislation and kept informed of all pending and future legislation likely to affect their organisation. Much of this legislation carries the requirement to demonstrate compliance through evidence that the appropriate training has been delivered to all relevant employees.

When carrying out any form of learning needs analysis it is important to take into account such laws as the Disability Discrimination Act and ensure that the analysis process itself, as well as the outputs, does not discriminate against any particular group of employees or potential employees.

Should the organisation be working towards achieving Investors in People (IIP) status or already have IIP there will be specific relevant requirements. National standards will require the organisations to demonstrate they have a planned approach to all aspects of training including identifying learning needs. They will have to show they regularly review the learning and development needs of all employees.

The learning needs analysis will need to take into account all these requirements in two ways. First, to ensure the actual process meets all legal and regulatory requirements, and secondly, to ensure the required learning needs for all staff are included in the analysis.

4.4.2 Business goals, objectives and strategies

The organisation will have a set of tactics and activities that are designed to meet current targets and business objectives. These are usually referred to as business plans. The objectives in a business plan are those that are critical to the success of the business, and are where most of the effort and resources will be directed.

Figure 4.4 shows a simple way of capturing the potential business needs from the business strategies as an input to the learning needs analysis.

Figure 4.4: Capturing potential business needs

Business goals and likely organisational changes	Potential impact on the capability of the people
PC on every desk	Everyone to be computer literate
Introduction of new automation	New skills for production workers
Overseas acquisition	Learn foreign language
etc	etc

These goals, objectives and strategies will need regular monitoring by the learning and development manager as the priorities for key change programmes and business objectives are regularly reviewed and changed. This review of the learning needs should be an integral part of the business planning process.

4.5 JOB ANALYSIS

The next level of analysis is job or task analysis. A job will contain a number of tasks, some tasks can be common across several jobs.

Analysing the job is often a significant part of a learning needs analysis. It looks at the requirements of a job, not at the capability of the individual to do the job. Jobs are a collection of tasks and responsibilities generally associated with the employee's title, such as secretary, supervisor, or accountant. HR specialists normally do a job analysis when a new job is created or there are substantial changes to an existing job. It is often used as an employment tool for classifying work and for selecting employees.

When undertaking this type of analysis it is essential to check that all affected departments, including line managers, are involved in the process. This should maximise effectiveness and minimise duplication.

A job list is a compilation of all job titles associated with a particular part of an organisation or the whole organisation. The purpose of a job list is to ensure that all the jobs belonging to a specific operation or process have been identified. The compilation of such a list is normally the responsibility of the HR department. If it already exists, the learning and development manager should ensure it is up to date and complete if it is to be used as the basis for a learning needs analysis.

A job analysis approach to learning needs analysis is fundamentally breaking down the complexity of a person's job into logical parts. It seeks to gather and

analyse detailed and objective information about all aspects of the job in question. This includes the component tasks, the responsibilities, the required standards of performance and the conditions in which it takes place. This information is then used to identify the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to perform the job to the required standard.

4.5.1 Job analysis methods

An effective way of doing this is to ask a number of people who are considered to be good at that specific job. Usually these would be the highest-level performers or the most experienced. Methods of job analysis include:

- **Diaries** – A method of self-reporting tasks carried out over a period of time. They are simple to do but can be disruptive and rely on the honesty of the reporter for accuracy.
- **Interviews** – Employees, in groups or individually, are asked to describe what they do and how they do it. Face-to-face situations are preferred as they give the opportunity for supplementary questions to be asked and explored in more depth. They can be prone to inaccuracies due to bad memory or reluctance to say what actually happens.
- **Observation** – An observer follows or shadows an individual or group as they carry out their job over a specified period of time. Observations can be used for this kind of analysis but they are time consuming. Observations also may have the problem of being viewed as ‘checking up on people’, causing resentment. This would need careful introduction and reassurances. Another potential problem with observations is that of ‘playing to the audience’ where those being observed do not act normally but exaggerate what they are doing and do not perform the job normally.
- **Critical incident** – Where an individual describes exactly what happened during a specific incident. This is intended to isolate particular behaviours relevant to the incident but as it depends on self-reporting it may not be detailed or accurate enough.
- **Repertory grid** – Where a range of skills and behaviours are identified on a grid and individuals are invited to rate their colleagues against each heading. The resulting rating is comprehensive and robust but requires considerable expertise to administer and analyse.
- **Checklist and inventories** – There are a great number of questionnaires and checklists produced covering a wide range of different jobs. These

have the advantage of being readily available and extensively researched. However, because of their general appeal they may not fit a specific organisation’s needs.

The output of a job analysis is usually a job description and person specification. Many organisations will already have a set of job descriptions and person specifications for all their jobs. Using these a collective set of generic skills and knowledge requirements can be identified. **Figure 4.5** shows a simple way to capture these requirements.

Figure 4.5: Capturing generic skills and knowledge

Separate activities contained in the job description	List of relevant capabilities, skill and knowledge
Type a letter Make a telephone call	Knowledge of business english Able to use word processing packages Clear speaking voice Able to use a telephone directory

Comparing people against the job descriptions and person specifications can be used to identify individual needs and gaps. This analysis usually takes one of two forms:

- Learning needs questionnaire, where the statements in the job descriptions are converted into questions for self-analysis.
- Learning needs interview, where the same questions are given verbally and explored more thoroughly.

4.5.2 Task inventory

Another method of job analysis is known as a task inventory. This is where the job is broken down into a set of separate tasks, activities or behaviours. A task is a function the jobholder performs such as typing a letter, adding up a column of figures, or operating a lathe. It is an action designed to contribute a specified end result to the accomplishment of an objective. It has an identifiable beginning and end that is a measurable component of a specific job.

The analysis then takes each task and describes it in terms of skills, knowledge and attitude required to do the task. A Task Inventory can be compiled for each job in a department or the whole organisation. Some jobs may have few tasks associated with them, while others may have a lot. Each task should have the following characteristics:

- a separate and necessary activity or action, independent of other actions in the performance of the job
- an identifiable start and end point which produces a measurable output
- the ability to be performed in relatively short periods of time
- the ability to be observed to confirm that the task has been performed.

The task inventory includes all the tasks that a jobholder requires to perform the job and to what standards.

4.6 TASK ANALYSIS

Task analysis is a process that produces a structured and reliable method of describing the task so that it can be consistently repeated. The task analysis identifies the measurable behaviours involved in the performance of each task. A task statement is then written for each task containing an action and an output. The analysis then breaks the task down into the Skills, Knowledge and Attitudes necessary to perform the task. It uses a systematic process of identifying those specific tasks to be trained, and a detailed analysis of each of those tasks in terms of frequency, difficulty, criticality and importance.

There are four logical stages in carrying out an effective task analysis:

- Identifying each tasks and generating a list
- Selecting and prioritising tasks that may be appropriate for training
- Dissecting tasks – identifying and describing the components of the tasks, goals, or objectives in terms of Skills, Knowledge and Attitudes
- Sequencing tasks and sub-tasks – defining the sequence in which instruction should occur that will best facilitate learning.

As with a job analysis, a task analysis can be carried by a variety of methods including interviews, direct observations and questionnaires.

When observing, the observer should ask the performer to slow down the task, if possible, so that it is easier to identify what they are actually doing. The observer should also ask the performer, as they perform the task, to explain what they are doing and why.

Tasks can be mental such as 'analysing' or 'calculating' or they can be physical such as 'writing' or 'lifting'. Tasks can also include interacting with others such

as 'mentor' or 'explain'. Therefore, asking them to talk out loud as they perform mental actions is vital as otherwise the action cannot be captured and may get missed from the analysis.

4.6.1 Task analysis methods

There are four common methods of carrying out a task analysis:

- **Hierarchical task analysis** – arranging actions in order
- **'If and Then' analysis** – decisions relationship
- **Scenario-based analysis** – lists of possible actions
- **Cognitive task analysis** – based on critical decisions

Hierarchical task analysis

This is the most common task analysis method, which involves analysing steps in the natural order in which they are normally performed. It may not always be easy to distinguish the logical sequence of steps in a task and the observer will need to decide how important it is to get the sequence accurately recorded. There is often no definitive sequence as circumstances will differ widely. This dilemma means it is critical that the manager determines what type of information is needed at the start.

'If and Then' analysis

This analysis method is used where the action the performer takes depends upon a particular condition being satisfied. The method gets its name from the choice presented to the performer which requires the decision 'if this happens *then* this is what I will do'.

A simple example for a trainer would be: '*If* the student is new *then* I will send him on the basic course. *If* he is an experienced user *then* I will send him on the advanced course'.

This method of analysis is done by interview questions asking for the rationale for the decision making process.

Scenario based analysis

This method is often used for management and leadership tasks, as the steps can be difficult to define or observe. Also these kinds of tasks do not have clear procedures for their correct performance. This method of analysis relies on the performer to explain what tasks are needed and in what sequence.

The process is done through interview questions asking what would be appropriate in a variety of situations. The output of this method of analysis is then a range of options as suitable responses to a specific event.

Cognitive task analysis

In many organisations, jobs are no longer defined by a collection of tasks, but by decision-making and problem-solving activities. A cognitive task analysis may be a more appropriate method for identifying the details of effective performance in these contexts.

A cognitive task analysis looks at the psychological processes underlying the performance and the subtle cues that may depend on context and experience. The main goal of a cognitive task analysis is to define the actual decision requirements and strategies of the task. This is done by diagnosing and characterising the decisions being made, the thought processes taking place and how those thoughts are turned into actions.

A cognitive task analysis focuses on the psychological processes underlying the behaviour, not the behaviour itself. It extends the learning needs analysis by providing information on the critical mental decisions and cognitive processes that make up an essential ingredient of many complex tasks.

4.6.2 Weighting tasks

Whichever method is used, there are four basic requirements to be identified from a task analysis in order to use the information as part of a learning needs analysis. For each task these requirements are:

- Importance
- Frequency
- Criticality
- Difficulty.

In many task analysis templates each of these important factors are given a rating scale, usually 1 to 5 where 5 means very frequent, very critical, very difficult. The higher the score the more likely it is that formal training is required. Those tasks with very low scores will probably not need to be considered for training.

Here are a wider range of typical questions that might be appropriate as a checklist when doing a task analysis:

- How difficult or complex is the task, ie easy, hard, very hard?
- What behaviours are used in the performance of the job?
- How frequently is the task performed, ie daily, weekly, monthly, yearly?
- How would you recognise good performance of the task?
- How critical is the task to the performance of the job?
- Is this an independent or interdependent task, if so what is the relationship between the various tasks and other people?
- What is the consequence of the task being performed incorrectly or not at all?
- What information is needed to perform the task? What is the source of information?
- How much time is needed to perform this task?
- What prerequisite skills, knowledge, and abilities are required to perform the task?

Regardless of which method of data gathering is chosen and what questions are asked, the data gathered must accurately reflect the specific tasks as they are actually performed for the analysis to be of value.

As with the job analysis, a detailed task analysis may already have been done, in which case the information is readily available. If it is not available, the learning and development manager will need to consider the cost of performing such a detailed process as part of the learning needs analysis. In most modern organisations the processes and procedures are changing so rapidly that the tasks may not stay constant long enough to make this a worthwhile activity.

4.7 NEEDS ANALYSIS

A needs analysis is a more comprehensive process than either a job or task analysis. It provides the learning and development manager with a complete understanding of the operational system being analysed. It looks not only at the tasks being performed but also at other parts of the system and processes that might influence performance.

A needs analysis is a proactive approach where the learning and development manager goes into the system or process and searches for problems or potential problems. The goal is to make the system more efficient and to prevent future problems from occurring. When looking for learning needs, or when problems arise, there are several instruments that may be appropriate.

4.7.1 Needs analysis methods

Some of the needs assessment instruments are the same as for the job or task analysis but are used differently to provide more comprehensive information.

- **Document research** – Analysis of budget documents, business plans, appraisals, quality control documents, goal statements, evaluation reports, personal development plans, work reviews, critical incident reports, scheduling and staffing reports, customer complaints or other business documents
- **Interviews** – Talk to supervisors, managers, subject matter experts and other employees
- **Observations** – Watch the job or task being performed, but remember the potential problems with this approach described earlier
- **Surveys** – Send out written questionnaires
- **Group discussions** – Lead a group discussion composed of employees and their supervisors.

The sort of questions the learning and development manager should be asking in interviews and group discussions include:

- What are your employees doing that they shouldn't be doing?
- What specific things would you like to see your people doing that they are not doing?
- When people perform this job correctly, what do they actually do?

- What do you think your employees' learning needs are and why?
- What do you think your learning needs are and why?
- Do you have all the resources needed to do your job effectively?
- Are job aids available, are they accurate and are they being used?
- Are the standards reasonable? If not, why not?
- If you could change one thing about the way you perform your work, what would it be?

The answers to these types of question will provide information on a wide range of needs, some of which will be learning needs.

4.8 TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Learning and development managers need to take into account the specific learning and development needs of individuals and teams within the organisation.

This section looks at:

- Skills analysis
- Knowledge analysis
- Using competencies
- High potential
- Teams.

The first thing to consider is the organisation's policy on individual needs.

- Does the organisation empower local managers or even the individuals to source their own training, and to what level?
- Does the organisation empower local managers to identify the learning needs of their people?
- Does the organisation provide a central suite of learning interventions from which individuals can select the most appropriate?

- Does the organisation have the policy, resources and expertise to design individual learning interventions for small numbers?

It is the job of the learning and development manager to separate learning needs from the other needs of the individuals. However, it is line managers' responsibility to support the development of their people. If the line managers are empowered to identify the learning needs of their people, the learning and development department needs to be able to suggest the most effective learning solution. The job, task or needs analysis will have defined both the skills and knowledge and the level of performance. Comparing the skills and knowledge of the individual against these standards is the usual approach to identifying the needs of individuals.

4.8.1 Skills analysis

Most learning needs analysis processes concentrate on the identification of skills. This is because skills can be defined as discrete observable behaviours that contribute to the successful achievement of tasks. Because they can be measured they can also be assessed and rated from poor to excellent or similar scales of ability.

Here are examples of skills assessment processes.

Example: Skills and personal characteristics review

Outlined below are 10 skills and personal characteristics to be used as a benchmark in reviewing how the jobholder sought to fulfil and achieve his/her objectives. Comment against each of the job relevant characteristics denoting **Strengths (+)** or **Areas for Development (-)** supplemented by examples.

Highlight any particular strengths (+) or areas for development (-) by marking 'X' in the column headed (+) or (-) against the appropriate characteristic.

Characteristics	Comments	+	-
Leadership and influencing Motivates others to work towards an 'agenda for change' Directs and co-ordinates activities of others Accepts responsibility/delegates authority to others			
Strategic thinking Capable of innovative thinking to find solutions Identifies future risks and opportunities Considers longer-term effects of actions			
Teamwork Supports own and cross-functional work groups Contributes to and enhances group decisions			
Communications Converses clearly and persuasively to different levels Proficient in presentations and meetings Adaptable and effective writing skills			

Example: Skills profile

This questionnaire is designed to assist the process of identifying the current attributes and future potential of individuals. The headings for each section cover the management capabilities expected of all managers in this organisation.

In response to each statement, you will need to put a cross on the appropriate line using the following assessments:

5 = The person always does this (is a role model)

4 = The person frequently does this

3 = The person sometimes does this

2 = The person rarely does this

1 = Either not applicable or the person has not yet had the opportunity to do this

Your numerical rating will act as an important indicator for those skills which require development and practice and those which simply require on-going use.

Skills	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership Is seen by colleagues as a role model in current job Displays an ability to inspire and motivate self and others Is assertive, not aggressive Is able to get others to do things when they don't directly manage them					
Innovation and creativity Creative when confronted with business challenges and problems Uses innovative state of the art approaches to solving problems Works from a compromise between creativity and the rule book					
Decision making Displays the ability to make, and commit to, tough decisions Gathers and analyses information from others to draw conclusions and produce outputs Is open to an appropriate level of influence and change and makes rational decisions Has a practical and common sense approach					
Resourcefulness Learns from both failures and success Demonstrates initiative, drive, persistence and involvement Spots opportunities and makes things happen					

Identifying an individual's current skills set

Identifying the current skills and knowledge set for individuals is often at the core of a learning needs analysis. It is normally the responsibility of the line manager to identify the skills and knowledge their people already have. To make effective use of a skill review, the manager first needs to explain what the skills are in words that are easy to understand and apply. Creating a 'skills checklist', which is a list of all probable skills that might be relevant, described in simple language, often does this.

The skills checklist is best completed in consultation with the individual by encouraging them to describe everything they feel they can do particularly well. It often helps to explore home or leisure activities as they might involve examples of work-related skills. This checklist should always include space for the individual or their manager to add additional skills. Sometimes the identification of individual needs by their manager is part of an appraisal process. The appraisal is normally done half-yearly or annually and part of the review of their performance is a review of their skills.

Identifying potential areas for development

Having identified an individual's current skills and knowledge, the manager should be in a good position to identify areas for future development. The first part of this stage in the analysis is to revisit the skills checklist to identify any missing or sub-standard skills that form a requirement of the job. These areas will determine short-term learning needs.

The second part is to discuss with the individual future development needs, which may be more long term or associated with promotion or job change.

Having quantified and agreed the skills to be developed with the individual, the final part is to prioritise the needs and agree an action plan. The documentation of this prioritised action plan is often referred to as the Personal Learning Plan (PLP) or Personal Development Plan (PDP).

Many organisations require the appraisal documents and associated PDPs to be sent to the HR department on completion. As well as an audit that the process is being carried out correctly, the returned documents provide a rich source of information for identifying learning needs.

- **Skill levels** – There is an ever-increasing drive for organisations to be faster, cheaper but still produce even higher quality. This puts tremendous pressure on them to get more from their workforce and puts a corresponding pressure on the employees to strive to be more productive

themselves. One possible consequence of this constant increase is that the skill levels that were acceptable last year are not high enough this year and certainly will not be high enough next year.

- **Currency of skills** – As well as maintaining and improving the level of a specific skill the individual and the organisation need to constantly check that their skills are still current. Many skills require regular updating and refreshing. The employer will need to ensure the skills are up-to-date to account for changes in working practices, improved technology and continuous improvements in the industry.

Therefore, when carrying out a skills audit the learning and development manager needs to ensure the required level of the skill will meet the future needs by asking:

- Is the level of skill still appropriate for the business needs?
- Are some of the identified skills no longer relevant to today's business?
- Do we need other skills we currently don't have?

In most organisations the skills of an individual cannot be seen in isolation. The unit of production is often the team where individual members of a team contribute different skills dependent on the needs of the team and the task. The manager should always make their assessment of individuals in the context of the team and, if relevant, factors beyond their immediate section or department should also be included.

4.8.2 Knowledge analysis

Individual learning needs analysis will include the identification of knowledge as well as skills. All jobs and tasks consist of a combination of both knowledge and skills and the analysis would not be complete without the identification of knowledge gaps.

If it assists the analysis, knowledge can be divided into the following three categories:

- **Factual knowledge** – giving names to things, ie objects or processes or locations. This type of knowledge includes facts, principles, natural laws, sequences of events and concepts. Methods for identifying factual knowledge needs include:
 - Written or verbal memory tests

- Flow charting or diagrams
- Interview or group questioning.
- **Procedural knowledge** – this is needed to perform a given task. Procedural knowledge shows the person knows the discrete steps or actions to be taken and the available alternatives to perform a given task or tasks. With practice, procedural knowledge can become an automatic process, the ability to perform a task without conscious awareness. Methods for identifying procedural knowledge gaps include:
 - Interviewing but with the specific purpose of uncovering the process steps
 - Observation to demonstrate the steps in a process followed by recording the process.
- **Strategic knowledge** – this is needed for decision-making and problem solving. It covers action planning and contingency planning and how to act appropriately with minimum information. Methods for identifying strategic knowledge gaps include:
 - Interviews to identify non-routine or critical events that challenged their thinking and events where their expertise made a significant difference
 - Critical Decision Method is a semi-structured interview using specific probing questions designed to explore the perceptions and judgements used to make decisions.

4.8.3 Competencies

Competencies tend to be associated with National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). However, many organisations have taken these principles and developed sets of personal competencies to suit their own needs rather than national standards.

One benefit of using competencies is they describe both the skills and knowledge required to satisfactorily perform tasks. The competencies for each individual usually consist of a combination of job specific and common behaviours.

The individual competencies across an organisation normally fit into an overall competency framework. This framework consists of all the

competencies required for effective performance in a particular job. The most useful competency framework will also describe the levels of performance expected in each of these areas.

The main advantages of competencies for learning needs analysis is that they are practical, observable and rooted in the job to be done. They are also impersonal – someone is either competent or not yet competent.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Services developed a competency framework based on SVQ's. Bob Virtue, Director of Fire Service Training for Scotland, saw the benefits for identifying learning needs in this way:

'Records must indicate where and how competence has been achieved, identify role related development needs and describe how these have been or will be satisfied. Recording systems that are non-bureaucratic save management time and encourage people to feel they "own" their development.'

Defining the competencies for a role or job and then assessing individuals against these is seen as an effective way of identifying gaps in skills and knowledge. Once the gap has been identified, then interventions can be developed to address them.

Competencies can also be used at an organisational level to quantify the level of capability across departments and divisions and identify common capability gaps. The use of standard competencies across an organisation also helps the development and use of standard personal development plans. The use of common language to describe core capability makes it easier to move people across the organisation from department to department and makes promotion requirements more transparent.

For organisations that do not already have competency frameworks and wish to explore their development, NVQs and SVQs are a good place to start.

4.8.4 High potential employees

Identifying the learning needs of groups of individuals designated as 'high potential' or 'high fliers' or similar descriptive phrases, is a specific task. Most development programmes for individuals classed as having 'high potential' start from the premise that there are a set of characteristics or competencies that successfully describe a high performing leader. Some form of assessment against these competencies is then set up, often in the form of an assessment centre.

Typically these types of assessment centres will include a number of exercises such as:

- a set of psychometric tests measured against an appropriate norm
- decision making via some form of 'in-box'
- strategic thinking via a case study
- team work and leadership via a group exercise.

There are usually three possible outcomes from such an assessment process.

- 'Ready now' meaning that the person already possesses the competencies for the higher level and is placed on some form of register waiting for a suitable vacancy, or is given an appropriate role straight away
- 'Not suitable' or 'not ready' meaning the person does not possess the required competencies and would need significant development. These people are usually required to return to their previous position and try to develop themselves to be ready for a future assessment process. Often the pragmatic outcome is that the individual pursues their career in other directions
- The most common outcome from a high potential assessment process is a set of development needs against the set of competencies. These development needs are often met by a structured, high-potential development programme. These high potential development programmes are a combination of inter-department experiences, special projects and secondments usually accompanied by a mentoring relationship with a sponsoring director or similar more senior person. The identification of the learning need for these programmes is usually done in consultation with the sponsors and against the set of competencies specific to the senior role to which they aspire.

4.8.5 Team learning needs

A team can be defined as a group of individuals working together towards a common goal, product, solution or purpose that requires the sharing of expertise, knowledge, and ideas in a cooperative and interdependent fashion. Teams may come together for short-term projects or to develop new strategies or they may be permanent teams working together to produce a product or service.

A useful tool for team learning that also supports individual learning is the skills matrix. This matrix normally has the business requirements down one side and the names of the team members across the top. Each person in the team is then 'ticked off' as competent against appropriate technical and soft skills. The completed chart shows visually and easily the current capabilities of all team members against business requirements, the overall level of competence within the team and any significant individual gaps.

Task analysis for a team looks at both collective teamwork and individual task work. Teamwork consists of interacting, cooperating or coordinating tasks that are important to the team's goals, distinct from performing individual tasks.

Like a job analysis, a team task analysis serves several purposes. It helps team design and team performance measurement as well as identifying team learning needs. The purpose of the team task analysis will dictate if the focus is on improving team tasks or team processes or a combination of the two.

Analysing teamworking requires a slightly different approach to analysing individuals performing tasks on behalf of the team. For example, the tasks that an effective team might need to demonstrate include:

- Participating and sharing in the team's leadership
- Supporting team roles and norms
- Participating by contributing data and knowledge
- Sharing in the decision-making process with the goal of reaching consensus
- Communicating, providing feedback, and interacting openly with the team members
- Working efficiently and effectively as a team unit.

Teamworking behaviours become more difficult to analyse because a group collectively performs them. Team tasks are best analysed by extracting task information from the team as a whole. It is critical that there is agreement by everyone in the team on the task's frequency, criticality, difficulty, importance, and the skills, knowledge and attitudes required. This complex activity requires that the learning and development manager become more of a facilitator than a task analyst.

4.9 GENERIC LEARNING NEEDS TECHNIQUES

This chapter has discussed a number of learning needs analysis tools with a wide range of uses. This section explores the main tools – interviews, using experts and surveys – in more detail.

4.9.1 Interviews

Interviewing is mentioned throughout this chapter as an important part of a learning needs analysis. The most common example is the appraisal and performance review meeting with the line manager. Alternately the learning and development manager may conduct interviews as part of a learning needs analysis. Good interviewing consists of the two key skills, asking appropriate questions and active listening.

Active or effective listening is needed for an efficient learning needs analysis interview. This involves really concentrating on the message being transmitted by trying to understand not only what is being said but how and why it is being said. The interviewer will need to adopt a disciplined, active listening approach during the analysis interview. When practising active listening the interviewer should also remember:

- Non-verbal signals are important and they should learn to recognise them in order to get the full picture
- Be aware of cultural differences in communication habits
- Recognise that their own emotions affect the signals they send
- Don't let their own values, attitudes, and beliefs get in the way
- Concentrate and pay attention to details
- Take accurate notes to avoid misunderstanding
- Tone of voice is often as important as what is said
- Be prepared to listen and show they are listening actively
- Establish the performance criteria before they begin to observe or listen to the performance
- Plan in advance to avoid distractions.

Asking appropriate questions is the other key skill needed for thorough analysis. Both open and closed questions can be effective. A closed question is one that may be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no' and usually begins with 'do you', 'are you', 'have you' and so on. It may also be a question to which the respondent is offered a choice of alternative replies, such as 'which of the following three skills are you best at...?' On the other hand, open questions are aimed at provoking an extended, 'free' response and might start with 'what' 'where', 'which', 'why', 'how' or 'when'.

Always use simple, uncomplicated and understandable language and also make sure not to make unfair or unrealistic assumptions or jump to conclusions.

Once the interviewer has asked a question, they need to allow the other person to answer. The skill of listening comes into play. Interviewers need to develop the ability both to show they are listening and to stay silent and to create pauses to hear the answers. When asking questions the interviewer should remember:

- Work hard to build rapport and put the other person at ease by adopting a friendly, supportive, helpful manner
- Be prepared to explain clearly why you need to ask questions
- Think about some questions in advance. However, do not be constrained by prepared questions. Be flexible enough to probe where necessary
- Always acknowledge answers positively and in an encouraging tone
- Give answers real consideration before responding yourself. A pause will show that you are really interested
- Probe, where needed, for extra information. Use phrases such as 'Is that all?' or 'Are you sure we have covered everything?'
- Realise the importance of developing self-awareness by using questions such as 'When and where did you think your performance began to improve?' or 'Why do you think you have difficulty with that task?'
- Always check your understanding by summarising.

It is important the interviewer develops his/her own natural style of interviewing. The most structured open questions in the world will not produce the right responses if they are delivered in an aggressive,

condescending, or over-challenging manner. Getting the right response to questioning is critical in achieving a useful output that can contribute to the learning needs analysis.

4.9.2 Using experts

Sometimes the best way to analyse a task, job or role is to observe an acknowledged expert performing the activity and record the behaviours. This may reduce the sensitivity caused by watching individuals performing their job where ulterior motivations may be suspected. Also it ensures that the behaviours and actions being observed are the appropriate ones for effective performance.

Ideally the observer should be a person who understands the task and who is relatively expert himself/herself. The learning and development manager, if not doing the observations himself/herself, needs to ensure the observer and expert performer understand what is required and what they have to do to make effective use of the observation. It is recommended that when using this method several experts are observed doing the same activity, ideally by different observers, to get as full and accurate a picture as possible.

After carrying out a series of observations, the observers should be brought together under the guidance and facilitation of the learning and development manager to pool their observations and agree an accurate output.

A second stage or alternative approach to using subject experts is to run a focus group with a small number (three to eight) of experts. Again under the facilitation and guidance of the learning and development manager the group should discuss the relevant tasks or roles. The group should include a line manager or supervisor to ensure wider considerations and other relevant information are included. The focus group should explore all the relevant tasks and decides which require training. The decisions should be based on the significant factors of frequency, difficulty, criticality and the consequences of error or poor performance, as described for other methods.

The learning and development manager needs to acknowledge that this method is time consuming for the subject experts. Also, choosing the 'right' subject experts for the focus group needs to be carefully considered. A suggested agenda for such a subject expert focus group is:

- Introducing the team and the purpose of the session
- Explaining the job to be analysed

- Identifying the tasks performed in the job and writing task statements
- Producing a sequence for the task statements
- Selecting the tasks appropriate for training.

Alternately, such a focus group of subject experts can be used to validate and verify the learning needs analysis done by other investigative methods.

4.9.3 Surveys

One of the most useful ways of gathering structured information relevant to identifying learning needs is a Learning Needs Survey. Surveys are not as effective as observations or interviews but they do enable access to a large number of people at a reasonable cost. A survey is the most cost effective way to reach the whole organisation, if it were appropriate to ensure everyone was included. However, it is important to remember the more people that are involved the more data will have to be compiled. This compilation can be a time consuming and a complex task to complete and the cost of this will have to be built into the cost effectiveness of the whole process.

Surveys are also an effective method if the analysis needs a representative distribution of the target population. If the sample of people to be surveyed is chosen carefully then only a relatively small percentage need to be approached to produce an effective result.

Designing such a survey document appears to be straightforward, but there are a number of factors to consider. People are more likely to contribute to such a survey if it is relatively quick and easy to complete and they can see a purpose and potential benefit.

The first factor to consider when designing a Learning Needs Survey is, who are the people you need to ask and how many of them will give sufficient useful evidence? In many small organisations it might be easier and less sensitive to survey everyone. For larger organisations the learning and development manager will need to decide how many would make up a representative sample, bearing in mind the average voluntary survey may produce less than 25% completed returns.

One group that might provide a useful perspective are customers and suppliers. Many organisations use professional survey consultants for this kind of work to ensure impartiality and objectivity. This approach may also be more cost effective than trying to do this specialised work internally. Similar survey tools and questions could be used for internal customer groups.

Another popular use of this analysis method is attitude surveys. These are now seen as strategic tools in many organisations, particularly as part of management development processes and as a form of 'health check'.

One specialised form of survey that is becoming increasingly popular is the 360-degree feedback survey. This is where an individual asks people above, below and to the side of them to complete a questionnaire on specific aspects of their behaviour. For some organisations this process is compulsory, scheduled as part of their appraisal process. The benefit of the 360-degree feedback as a tool in the context of learning needs, is that it compares data from different sources and perspectives. This data is very useful for identifying strengths and weaknesses for development.

Of particular relevance to the subject of learning needs is what is often called an 'organisational learning climate survey'. This tool is used to get feedback on the various types of learning intervention used in the organisation. Questions are asked about how important and effective each learning intervention is in the view of the respondent.

Having decided who will receive the survey the next factor to consider is the format of the actual questions.

- **Freeform questions** – These are open questions inviting any response. The advantages are:
 - People can express their real feelings and say what ever they wish
 - They might encourage unexpected responses that are of value
 - The actual words of the answers can be quoted to give authenticity and impact.
- The limitations are:
 - They take a long time to answer and require concentration
 - Some answers might be difficult to classify against learning needs
 - They are difficult to summarise and produce quantitative data from
 - They take longer and require more effort for the recipient to complete.
- **Multiple choice questions** – These are questions where a range of possible answers that have already been prepared. The advantages are that they are:

- Quick and easy to complete
- Quick and easy to analyse
- Easy to convert into quantitative data.
- The limitations are that they:
 - Only provide basic data with no explanation as to why people have given their answers
 - Require attention to the wording of the questions so they are unambiguous
 - Only get information on what you have asked so there is no additional useful information
 - Need care to ensure the choice and wording of the questions do not produce bias.
- **Yes/No questions** – This form of survey is only looking for agreement or disagreement to a set of statements. The advantages are:
 - The same as for multiple choice but are easier to write and analyse.
- The limitations are:
 - The same as for multiple choice with even less information on why
 - Many situations are not black or white and forcing such a simple choice can be unhelpful and make people feel resentful.

The most common choice of questioning format for a learning needs survey is a set of multiple choice questions with supplementary opportunities for freeform answers. **Figure 4.6** shows an example of a survey.

Figure 4.6: Example learning needs survey

Dear colleague,

This is a short survey asking you to comment on the leadership skills of your manager.

The survey is being sent to everyone in your division and the results will be used to help us identify the training needs for all managers.

All the returns will be treated in confidence and you are not required to identify yourself or your manager in any way.

A summary of the results and how we plan to use them will be published before the end of the year.

It should take no more that 15 minutes for you to complete the form.

Thank you for your cooperation.

1. How well does your manager keep you informed of what is going on in the wider business?			
Very well	Fairly well	Not very well	Not at all
2. How often do you have a one-to-one meeting with your manager?			
Once a month	Once a quarter	Once a year	Never
3. Does your manager involve you in important decisions?			
Very often	Fairly often	Not very often	Never
4. Does your manager always treat you fairly?			
Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Seldom
5. How well does your manager show interest in your development?			
Very well	Fairly well	Not very well	Not at all
Please use this space to add any additional comment about your manager that you believe would be helpful.			

Having decided the question format and written the questions the next factor to consider is the method of actually conducting the survey. The method may be determined by the information the learning and development manager needs for a comprehensive learning needs analysis.

An important question for the manager to consider is that of anonymity. If the analysis is to identify specific learning needs then the location, job title, grade, length of service and even the name might be required. If this sort of information is requested it will be obvious to the recipient that they may be identified. This will influence how they complete the survey and it is important they understand how and where this information will be used. If an anonymous reply is appropriate, then ensure questions that will reveal a person’s identity are not included. Also you may need to consider whether using the organisation’s electronic network or intranet to distribute the survey will allow anonymous returns.

An alternative approach is to deliver the surveys personally and collect them the same way. This is likely to increase the response rate but is obviously labour intensive and time consuming. A further extension of this personal

approach is to use the questions as a structured interview where the learning and development manager or a representative asks the questions and writes down the person's reply.

Finally, ensure there is a feedback mechanism where those involved can see the outcome of their input and how it is being used for the benefit of the organisation and themselves. This way they are more likely to be cooperative if asked to do something similar in the future.

A good practice is always to run a small pilot or test to check the questions are understood and elicit the responses anticipated. This may avoid greater, more embarrassing and more expensive problems later.

4.10 TURNING BUSINESS NEEDS INTO LEARNING NEEDS

The final stage of the analysis is to identify those needs that are actually learning needs rather than any other type. The learning and development manager has to be able to confirm that the need can best be met by a learning intervention, as opposed to any other intervention such as job aids, improved processes or new technology.

Traditionally the learning and development managers' role was to develop and maintain a portfolio of training courses. The line managers came to him/her requesting a training course to address their business needs. This traditional view is now being challenged by the growth in learning solutions rather than training courses. The first response of the learning and development manager should be to challenge whether a learning solution is the most effective and appropriate response. **Figure 4.7** shows an example of a training request form that does more than simply ask for a course. The questions help identify learning needs, not just ask which course the manager wants. This means the line manager has to work harder to identify exactly what is needed, not just pick a course from a list of titles.

Figure 4.7: Example training request form

<p>Training Requested for:..... Grade:.....</p> <p>Job Title:.....</p> <p>Dept/Area:.....</p> <p>Manager:..... Date:.....</p>

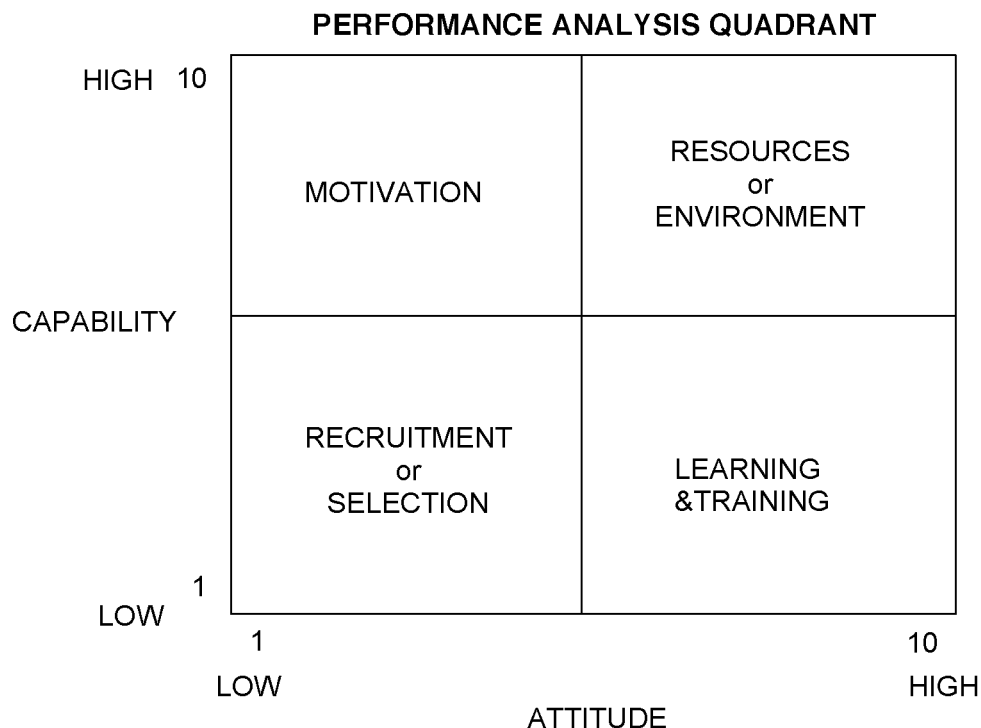
1. In what part of the job does the learning need occur?	
2. What in your opinion is lacking? Is it knowledge or skill or both?	
When and how does it show?	
4. What do you want the employee to be able to do?	
5. Does the employee have a clear understanding of the purpose of the training? Are they willing and able to learn?	
6. How will the success of the training be measured?	
7. What will be done to ensure implementation of the learning?	
8. Please add any additional information relevant to the identified need.	

4.10.1 Performance analysis

When the collection stage of the learning needs analysis has been completed, many organisational problems will emerge that are initially considered as learning needs but on further investigation are not. The problem may be lack of resources or systems inadequacies or other business deficiencies that cannot be addressed by training. The technique often used to identify learning needs from the analysis of the business needs is often called performance analysis or systems analysis.

The learning and development manager must decide, for all the needs identified, whether or not they are learning needs. The Performance Analysis Quadrant is a tool to help answer that question. Asking two questions – Does the person have the capability to do the job? and Does the person have the proper attitude to perform the job? – will define if it is a learning need or something else. The learning and development manager assigns a rating between 1 and 10 to the answer to these two questions, and the overall figure places the person in one of four performance quadrants (see **Figure 4.8**).

Figure 4.8: Performance analysis quadrant



1. Motivation quadrant: If the person has sufficient capability but has an inappropriate attitude, this may result in motivational problems. Adjusting someone’s motivation is not a learning need and alternative solutions will be more effective.

2. Resources or environment quadrant: If the person has both capability and a favourable attitude but performance is still unsatisfactory, then the problem may not be in their control. It could be lack of resources or time, or inadequate equipment, or lack of support. Again this is not a learning need.

3. Recruitment or selection quadrant: If the person lacks capability and has a poor attitude, that person may be in the wrong job. The problem is with the selection or recruitment process. Again this is not a learning need for the individual but may be a learning need for the recruiting department or manager.

4. Training quadrant: If the employee wants to perform but cannot due to a lack of knowledge or skills, then additional training may be the answer.

Therefore, if the person knows how to meet the required performance standards for a legitimate task and is willing to do so then it is a learning need. For the other quadrants another action is likely to be needed. Some of these other actions might be counselling, job redesign, or organisational development.

Often, the employee does not perform to standards due to time factors, working conditions, or a misunderstanding of the required standards. Management must recognise and consider other factors that impact on performance and which may not be corrected by training. Factors such as the appropriateness and clarity of procedures, human factors, management style and the work environment all affect performance.

Performance analysis considers every aspect of the whole system then identifies a range of different interventions to resolve the problem or achieve the goal. This form of analysis will separate learning needs from other needs and can be applied to any of the information collected by the earlier stages of the learning needs analysis. Performance analysis takes a close look across all functions involved and, therefore, should include people from all functions, not just learning and development. This proactive approach can put the learning and development manager in a strong position to show that training is not the answer to a specific problem and provide evidence to refute the challenge that training did not 'fix' the problem.

4.10.2 Learning goals

Assuming that the business need is an appropriate learning need then the next step for the learning and development manager is to set clear learning objectives. The following questions provide a logical sequence for turning a business goal into a learning goal:

- 1 What is the actual business goal or problem?
- 2 What is the current position or starting point?
- 3 What is the end point or success factor that needs to be achieved?
- 4 What are the key stages or milestones?
- 5 Who are the stakeholders who are involved, both for and against?
- 6 What is the current capability level and how does it need to change or increase?

- 7 How is the capability measured?
- 8 What are the subsequent learning gaps?
- 9 Do the people have the capability to achieve the changes?
- 10 Do we have the internal capability and capacity to do it ourselves or should we use external expertise?

Note that some of these questions refer back to the original preparation stage and so complete the circle. This process should be followed for each business goal. The result will be a set of learning goals, some of which will be clearly more urgent, important and influential than others.

4.10.3 Strategic choices

Strategy is about developing options and then making choices. With a learning needs analysis this means prioritising all the identified learning goals against a set of relevant criteria such as:

- The criticality of the learning need to the achievement of the business goal
- The urgency of the learning need
- The business benefits in comparison to the cost of the intervention.

This final stage of the learning needs analysis will enable the learning and development manager to select and prioritise the most effective learning and development needs.

The output of this analysis forms the input to the next stage of the learning and development plan, which is deciding how to deliver the resulting programmes of learning activities and choosing the most effective learning solution.

4.11 POTENTIAL PITFALLS

This chapter has tried to explain current best practice in carrying out learning needs analysis in organisations. It is worth taking a few moments to consider common mistakes that can and have been made.

4.11.1 Inappropriate motivation

Managers often believe they know what members of their team need in the way of development. However, this often consists of them choosing from a list of available courses or asking the individuals to pick from such a list. Sometimes the motivation of the manager in recommending courses may be inappropriate. Sending someone on a course can be used as a reward or to get the person out of the way. Asking the individual what training they want can be subject to the same inappropriate motivations.

An effective needs analysis will take the wishes of the people into account but as only a small part of the whole process. The learning and development manager must ensure the learning needs analysis concentrates on current and future skill and capability levels and not just reviewing the existing courses.

4.11.2 The easy option

If the application of the analysis tools is not done rigorously, the data collected is likely to produce generalities. Phrases such as 'improved communication skills', 'higher computer literacy' and 'enhanced leadership' will be used to describe skill gaps. While these may be genuine learning needs the shallowness of the analysis makes them difficult to address effectively. The learning and development manager must ensure the analysis enables a more critical examination of the needs in order to produce more detailed data.

4.11.3 Focus only on training needs

This chapter has consistently made the distinction between training and learning. Put simply, learning can take place through a wide variety of experiences, only one of which would be a training course. The learning and development manager must ensure they do not subconsciously see learning needs only in terms of training courses. Learning needs are often best met by improving processes, introducing new technology, providing job aids, coaching and mentoring etc. not just running courses.

4.11.4 Focus only on technical learning needs

When analysing jobs or tasks it is easy to concentrate on obvious physical and technical behaviours. Also, when interviewing employees or their manager they will often express the same limited view on what the important skills required to do the job effectively are. However, the less obvious skills are usually the most critical. These include interpersonal skills, teamworking skills,

decision-making skills and problem solving skills. The learning and development manager must ensure their analysis uncovers and includes these less observable but vital competencies.

4.11.5 'One size fits all'

Everyone is unique, with different behavioural patterns, attitudes, outlooks on life and ways of learning. A possible danger of a learning needs analysis is the assumption that we all learn the same way. This might produce a learning plan with only one way, or limited options to achieve the required learning. It is important that the Learning and Development manager sees the employees as individuals with different preferences in their learning options. Some prefer a structured and formal learning environment, while others prefer a more hands-on approach. Making allowances for these learning preferences within the learning needs analysis will improve the acceptance and effectiveness of the resultant development interventions.

4.11.6 'Quick and dirty'

There are so many pressures on people in businesses now that there seems to be not enough time to do any job properly. Also, the pace of modern business life is ever increasing with people wanting everything 'now'. This climate creates a challenge to the Learning and Development manager endeavouring to do an effective learning needs analysis. The obvious consequences are that the analysis is done briefly and superficially, perhaps through a quick group meeting or a simple questionnaire; or only short-term and obvious needs are considered. The learning and development manager must try to take a longer-term view and be as comprehensive with the analysis as possible in order to be of maximum value to the organisation and the individuals.

4.11.7 No link with business strategy

A potential danger is that the learning and development department develops its own research parameters and carries out the learning needs analysis in isolation from the rest of the business. The output of a learning needs analysis must show clear alignment with the strategies and objectives of the organisation if it is to be taken seriously and be effective. The subsequent training and development programmes must be able to add value to the achievement of the strategy and take the organisation forward in the required direction.

To ensure this happens the learning and development manager must understand the business language, its challenges and its drivers. The learning

and development manager should strive to have a place at the strategy forum or direct access to the board. If not, they need to gain direct access to the strategy owners at the relevant level. Only with this direct access to the strategies at an early stage can the manager ensure the learning needs analysis will be looking at the right things.

4.12 CONCLUSIONS

A perfect learning needs analysis will be of little benefit unless the organisation has created a supportive learning environment. Organisations need to instil a sense of purpose in employees and create the opportunities for them to learn.

The attitude and capability of the line manager is a major factor in both accurately identifying learning needs and actively supporting the delivery of the resulting learning interventions. For that reason, promoting learning should be viewed as an essential leadership practice. The growth in this approach recognises that given the right encouragement and support, employees will be positively motivated to learn.

There are many ways of identifying and analysing learning needs and in this chapter we have explored a wide variety of methods. Some are specialised, requiring significant expertise to use effectively, such as repertory grid.

The learning and development manager does not need to be an expert in them all. A brief examination such as that provided here will be sufficient to identify those methods appropriate to the organisation and the context.

There are some learning needs analysis methods that may be used on a continual basis, such as informal observation. Some are more appropriate to use on a regular, perhaps annual basis such as analysis of appraisals and personal learning plans. Some methods are suitable for everyone or large numbers of people such as surveys and questionnaires. Other methods, such as assessment/development centres, are more suited to small groups like senior managers or those with high potentials.

The methods described do not have to be used independently. A fully effective learning needs analysis will combine a number of these methods. An example would be using a learning needs analysis questionnaire to provide the structure for one-to-one interviews or focus groups. Some of the methods require a learning and development professional to administer, such as analysing planning data to assess the need for induction training. Other methods require the cooperation of the line manager to identify learning

needs in their employees such as annual appraisals or performance reviews. Some methods are suitable for the individual to think about and identify their own development needs.

The most effective and efficient learning needs analysis system is one that brings together the needs of the learning and development professional, the line manager and the individual within a supportive learning organisation.

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