

Adapted from [http://www.csc.noaa.gov/needs/section\\_b-2.html](http://www.csc.noaa.gov/needs/section_b-2.html)

**Some Definitions of Needs Assessments**

- All effective training begins with needs assessment. The training needs survey measures what skills employees have, what they need, and how to deliver the right training at the right time. – *American Society of Training and Development*
- A Needs Assessment is a systematic exploration of the way things are and the way they should be. These "things" are usually associated with organizational and/or individual performance. – *D. Stout, Performance Analysis for Training, 1995.*
- Needs analysis is an examination of the existing need for training within an organization. It is a gathering of data that enables you to make an informed estimate of the changes desired or demanded by those organizations. – *Stuart Dalziel, Planning and Managing Training and Development*
- Needs Assessment is a process used anytime someone carefully asks the question "How can I find out what is really happening (or needed; at the root of the problem; missing; etc.)?" – *Cornell, Needs Assessment Tips and Techniques*
- Data gathering methods by themselves are not a needs assessment. The needs assessment process has to result in decision-making for the process to be complete. – *University of Virginia*
- Needs assessments and needs analysis are interchangeable and have the same purpose and meaning: to assess and analyze. The purpose is to ensure that there is a need for training and to identify the nature of the content of the training program. – *AMX, Training Needs Assessment*

Too often people consider only one solution (a want) and discuss it as a need, when in truth what they really need will not be addressed. Effective questioning can reveal the need behind the want. However it is important to remember that the "want" is often the best solution. Two things to remember:

**Needs are gaps** – the space between what currently exists and what should exist.

**Wants are solutions** – a proposed means to filling the gap.

Examples of Wants	Examples of Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I want to hire a budget analyst</li><li>• I want to learn more about social marketing</li><li>• I want a tool to help me write metadata</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I need to do more accurate budget projections</li><li>• I need to increase the effectiveness of the education programs</li><li>• I need to accurately document my scientific data</li></ul>

The goal of a needs assessment is to design an effective program, product, or service that addresses the group's needs and "wants."

The objectives of a needs assessment define what the needs assessment will achieve and provide a more complete understanding of the problem to be addressed. Examples of some appropriate objectives are listed below:

- Identify existing degree of knowledge, skills, and the attitudinal characteristics surrounding a particular issue or topical area. In order to develop a relevant program, it is critical to determine current understanding of an issue from the participant's perspective, not from what the participant is thought to believe, or to be able to do.
- Identify individuals or groups of individuals who most need additional skills training or access to information and technologies. Through interviews, for example, an individual may indicate interest in a refresher seminar or workshop to enhance skills and knowledge related to a particular issue. A geographic information systems (GIS) analyst may see the need for a specific tool to help create better data layers.
- Identify motivations and conditions that contribute to an individual's degree of interest in an issue and ability to access or purchase the final product or training course.
- Solicit opinions about content, functionality, etc. in order to draw participants into the design process, and build interest and active participation in the product, service, or training.

	<b>Step Summary</b>	<b>Questions</b>	<b>Risks</b>
1.	<p><b><i>Confirm the Issues and Audience</i></b></p> <p>In this step you will establish the purpose of the needs assessment, determining if it is a legal requirement, a company requirement, or simply desired for general knowledge.</p> <p><b>Notes:</b> Always address your goals and objectives in synthesis. An executive summary is often helpful.</p>	<p>Is this a new issue or audience for the organization?</p> <p>Is there widespread agreement up the organizational chain that this issue or audience needs to be addressed?</p>	<p>Unknown stakeholders; political blunders; content blunders</p> <p>Lack of support for the results of needs assessment</p>

	Step Summary	Questions	Risks
2.	<p><b><i>Establish the Planning Team</i></b></p> <p>Establish the planning team while also determining the resources available for the needs assessment, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Money</li> <li>• Number of individuals required for statistical purposes</li> <li>• Research or prior studies</li> <li>• Expertise of researchers</li> </ul> <p><b>Notes:</b> All steps should be conducted as part of a group effort and in the form of a planning team. The planning team ideally will consist of members from different stakeholder groups, as well as individuals with expertise in the area of research.</p> <p>Good communication between planning team members is essential. The team must establish protocols and job duties</p>	<p>Are the stakeholders and partners new or well known?</p> <p>How geographically or organizationally dispersed is the team?</p> <p>Is there expertise within the team?</p>	<p>Not instilling ownership in the final product</p> <p>Communication difficulties</p> <p>Can spend a lot of time</p>
3.	<p><b><i>Establish the Goals and Objectives</i></b></p> <p>Based on the available resources confirmed in step two, you will establish goals and objectives. This step has three phases:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the optimum (desired) and actual levels of knowledge or skill.</li> <li>2. Identify the cause(s) for the lack of knowledge or skill.</li> <li>3. Devise a solution or series of solutions.</li> </ol> <p><b>Notes:</b> Ensure goals and objectives drive the outputs (statistical analysis and reporting). This will prioritize the rest of your steps and determine the amount of effort you spend on the needs assessment</p>	<p>Are the goals widely shared by the audience?</p> <p>Are your objectives measurable?</p> <p>Will the project be considered a success if the objectives are met?</p>	<p>Different priorities from different team members or supporting organizations; people will disengage from the process</p> <p>You will not know if you have achieved them and to what degree</p> <p>Long-term support for doing needs assessments</p>

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4.	<p><b><i>Characterize Your Audience</i></b></p> <p>Determine the following audience characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of individuals present (i.e. sample size)</li> <li>• Skill and knowledge level</li> <li>• Educational level</li> <li>• Organizational niche</li> <li>• Cultural characteristics and possible biases towards training</li> <li>• Attitudes and biases</li> <li>• Ability to access or attend training</li> <li>• Ability to purchase or otherwise access product</li> </ul> <p><b>Notes:</b> The needs assessment can also validate or demonstrate weaknesses in perceptions. This should be used to check critical characteristics.</p>	<p>How long have you worked with the audience?</p> <p>How much variation is there within the audience?</p>	<p>Assumptions can backfire</p> <p>Stereotypes don't always work</p>
5.	<p><b><i>Conduct Information and Literature Search</i></b></p> <p>Review information and literature regarding the issue by looking at studies from management plans, public records, strategic plans, reports, and articles.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> Surveys are often used to clarify or answer questions that have surfaced through reviewing reports</p>	<p>Has this audience or issue been surveyed in the past?</p> <p>What other kinds of reports would shed light on the audience or issue?</p>	<p>Results may be outdated</p> <p>Wasting time and effort to do something that has been done before</p> <p>Not knowing about information that would make the job easier or better</p>
6.	<p><b><i>Select Your Data Collection Methods</i></b></p> <p>Decide how you will collect data, from choices ranging from personal interviews to written tests.</p> <p><b>Notes:</b> Your decision here will affect much of the time and resources you have for your project.</p>	<p>Have all of the methods been considered?</p> <p>Do the audience's characteristics provide insight into what methods they would be receptive to?</p> <p>How much expertise is there in-house?</p>	<p>The two most popular are also the two most intrusive</p> <p>Upsetting your audience</p> <p>Less experience means more time designing and analyzing and less concrete results</p>

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7.	<p><b><i>Determine Your Sampling Scheme</i></b></p> <p>Sample more than you think you need. The biggest threat to a survey is that the results are inaccurate because of the sample size not being representative</p>	<p>What's statistically recommended?</p> <p>What is the population size of your audience?</p>	<p>Results may be invalid for "academics"</p> <p>Too many or too few in your sample</p>
8.	<p><b><i>Design and Pilot the Collection Instrument</i></b></p> <p>Always pilot your questionnaire! Better data requires more time, money and resources.</p>	<p>How will you pilot your instrument?</p> <p>What kind of expertise is on your planning team?</p> <p>How important is statistical precision?</p> <p>How will data collection be standardized?</p>	<p>Instrument will not be clear or gather necessary data</p> <p>The audience will not be receptive to the survey instrument</p> <p>Asking too many questions may irritate the respondents</p>
9.	<p><b><i>Gather and Record Data</i></b></p> <p>There are various strategies for increasing response rate, including reminder calls and postcards. Of prime importance is ensuring anonymity to respondents.</p>	<p>Can you use untrained personnel to gather data?</p> <p>Can you use volunteers to gather data?</p> <p>Are you getting your desired response rate?</p>	<p>Data will be biased</p> <p>Language or vocabulary issues</p> <p>Invalid study</p>
10.	<p><b><i>Analyze Data</i></b></p> <p>Keep findings and interpretation of findings separate in reporting.</p>	<p>How much statistical analysis do you do?</p> <p>Is the gap or issue best addressed through training?</p> <p>Is the data analyst the same as the data gatherer?</p> <p>What statistical tests will be run?</p> <p>How will non-responses to individual survey items be dealt with?</p>	<p>Under- or overwhelming your audience with your report</p> <p>Missing trends or patterns</p> <p>Not accounting for other possible critical barriers</p> <p>Letting bias slip into the process</p>

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11.	<p><b><i>Manage Data</i></b></p> <p>Determine how data will be organized and archived.</p> <p>The importance of this step is often not recognized until it is too late.</p>	<p>Will you ever need to refer to these data again?</p> <p>Will the raw data be retained? How will it be stored?</p> <p>If contracted, who owns the data?</p>	<p>There may be unforeseen reasons that would necessitate the data being used again</p> <p>Inadequate metadata</p>
12.	<p><b><i>Synthesize Data and Create Report</i></b></p> <p>Always address your goals and objectives in synthesis. Report must include problems or errors with the design and the implementation of the survey. An executive summary is often helpful.</p>	<p>Who is your audience for the report?</p> <p>Did you address your objectives?</p>	<p>People who are making the decisions not understanding process or results</p> <p>Not reaching your goal</p>