

# Really Understanding Your Audience

*Make sure you're taking advantage of needs assessments*

 By Dr. Ben Locwin



## Background

A review of the current literature as well as an observational study of organizations indicates that most (91%) of the people in trainer roles of one capacity or another (provided by survey feedback) use some form of formal icebreaker for their group activities. They also are using pre-fabricated group dynamics tools (99%). Though these tools are ubiquitous, they are rarely supported by robust scientific evidence demonstrating their efficacy.

This means that although we love to use and push tools for adult learners, there are still more open questions than answers regarding their effectiveness. Though claims are made for the utility of these techniques, these are all questionable, because we *continue* to ask the same questions over and over: “Why don’t adult learners learn? How can I make them listen more attentively? How can I get them to engage?”

### What’s the Disconnect?

The plain and simple fact is that because each organization represents an entirely different set of conditions, including systemic, individual, and cultural, that we can’t possibly hope to get the same (or even similar!) results from one business to the next using the same programs, tools, or technologies. For example, a small business comprised of artisans would likely have different needs out of their learning program than a healthcare business, or a tech-company. In

some very real sense, success or failure of the deployment of a learning initiative isn’t as dependent on the ‘objective quality’ of the program itself as it is the ‘fit’ between the program and the organization in which it is being administered.

I’ve spent a great deal of time coaching decision-makers in health-care clinics and clinical trials about how to measure the right things. This is absolutely *no different* from the approach in aligning learning opportunities with the learners in a company. In much the same way as medicines and medical devices are approved to treat very *specific* individuals and conditions, and not those who do not fit the initial criteria (indications) – we cannot apply a ‘one size fits all’ approach to training modalities. Even insofar as major technological categories are concerned; For example: just because web-based training can be tailored to suit a very large audience demographic, the web-based training delivery method may not be the right choice for many situations. You can find out the answers to these questions yourself for your very real and very dynamic organization by conducting a proper Needs Assessment.

### Needs Assessment – What Is It? How Do I Do It?

First, you’ll need to ask yourself the questions: “What am I interested in knowing? Am I improving on my organization’s current performance? Or am I correcting some identified deficiencies?” At a very

high level, I have created graphical representations of these choices below in Figures 1, 2, and 3:

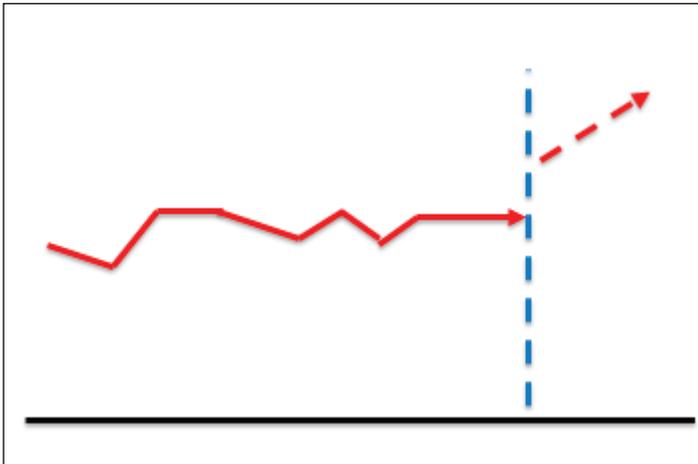


Figure 1

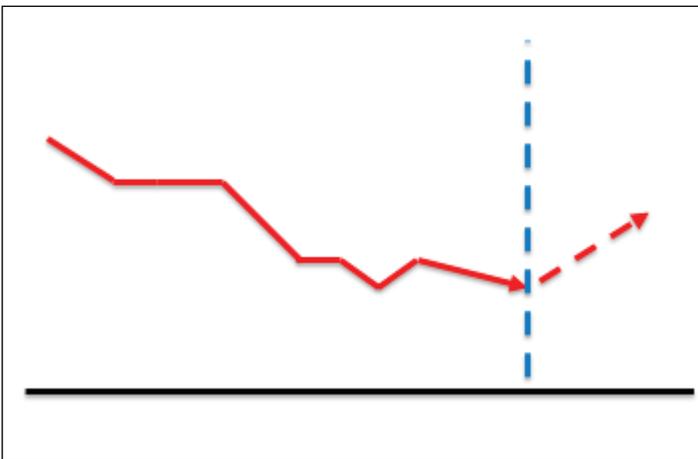


Figure 2

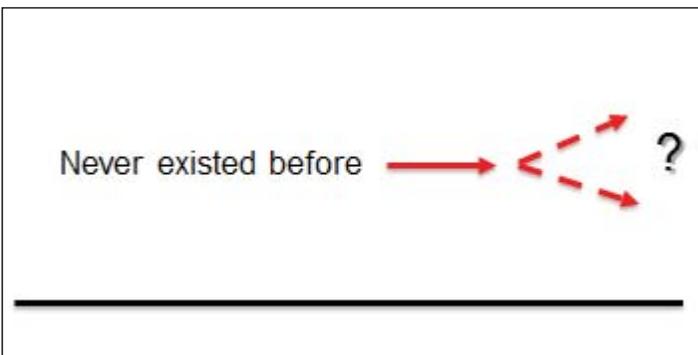


Figure 3

Figure 1: Training to support a *new* product, service, or launch of business change. Figure 2: Course-correcting adverse business trends. Figure 3: Improving on an existing, productive organization.

The general tactic of Needs Assessment is the same as that done for market research: First identifying *what* you want to know, followed by collecting data to answer your question(s) and provide support for ideas of *how* to get to your desired state.

### Organizational Assessment

These are performed to assess the overall Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other required by an organization. A SWOT analysis can be conducted at this level to see what current KSAOs are supporting

the organization's strengths and opportunities and balanced with alleviating the weaknesses and threats to the organization. This of course should include internal *and* external factors such as market forces, demographics, geopolitical factors (if any reasonable), and so forth.

### Occupational Assessment

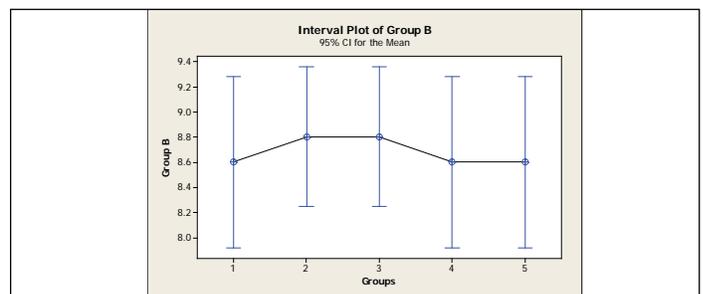
These are performed as a gap analysis of what KSAOs are required for a position, and which discrepancies exist.

### Individual Assessment

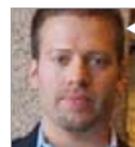
Performed to determine how well a particular employee is performing his or her job, as well as highlighting any gaps that may be present which may pose a risk to the business. This allows for the determination of which employees need training, and what type of training is needed.

### Performing Your Analysis, and Pitfalls to Avoid

You could perform an analysis at your organization to determine what type of training modality or electronic learning method would provide you with the best return on your investment. Your data analysis might include survey results from a large sample of the organization (>30%) across a variety of departments, 2-sample *t*-test of statistical significance of one learning opportunity versus another, and/or analysis of variance (*ANOVA*) to determine whether one type of training modality is more effective than another (pre-specified  $\alpha = .05$ ). You could also perform a cross-over study, where you expose your learners to one type or modality of training, the *switch* them to another. This will help you answer the question: During study cross-over, does changing modality away from pre-specified tools lead to more positive perceptions in adult learners? You could measure this by using Kirkpatrick evaluations completed for each phase to understand: preferences (I), retention (II), behavior modification (III), and reported business results (IV), see Figure 4. In the case of trying to improve your business, focus mostly on levels II-IV, as the veracity of feedback from an initial opinion survey [has been found to be questionable](#).



Keep in mind that tying business results (*e.g.*, sales loss, product defects, errors) to claims that different training is needed is susceptible to other uncontrolled factors of a multivariate nature, which may be unrelated to training. **TEL**



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