

Notes on Learning Needs Analyses (LNA)

These notes are from the Fenman website and provide some useful background information for tutors delivering Smart Business Coaching programme, Session 2.

(Source: <http://www.fenman.co.uk/traineractive/training-manual/learning-needs-analysis.html>)

It's not rocket science: Training, like all other professions, has its own language. Someone new to the terms LNA, KSA (knowledge, skills, attitudes), the learning and development cycle and the 'performance gap' may be forgiven for deciding to call in the experts rather than trying to decipher the jargon and deal with the analysis of learning needs themselves. As a trainer or line manager with responsibility for analysing learning needs you can achieve a great deal by applying common sense to the task. However, your efforts will reap greater rewards if you are able to make use of tools and methods that have been designed to refine the process. Understanding some of the basic concepts surrounding learning needs analysis is an important first step. This training activity aims to apply the KISS (Keep It Simple and Straightforward) method to explaining some of the most commonly used training terms. This will help participants to understand how learning needs analysis fits into the wider learning and development function and supports the overall business aims.

You introduce the activity by explaining that training, like all other professions, has a language of its own. A few examples of training terms that may be confusing when first encountered are considered and successfully explained. The participants are then introduced to the learning and development cycle and go on to work in pairs to practise identifying each stage. Next, they consider the concept of the performance gap and again work in pairs on an exercise that aims to check understanding of the term and enables them to choose appropriate solutions. You then move on to explain KSA, asking the participants to contribute examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are directly relevant to their own roles. Finally, the concept of competencies is briefly examined before the activity concludes with a summary of the key learning points.

Examining the business needs

Human Resource Departments are sometimes criticised for having an 'ivory tower' mentality, meaning that their work is seen as a separate entity rather than as a fully integrated support to the business. Although this criticism is often unjust, as a trainer you need to take a proactive approach to ensure that it cannot ever be levelled at you. In order to analyse learning needs effectively and then go on to provide effective training and/or other development, it is essential to have a full understanding of the overall direction of your company and its business aims. This activity encourages participants to consider ways of gathering and analysing information to ensure that their analysis of learning needs, and subsequent training and other development, supports the company's business plans.

You begin the activity by emphasising that to be fully effective, training and other development must always support the needs of the business. The participants work in pairs to consider this 'bigger picture' and identify things of which they need to be aware. Then they explore methods of gathering information and identify problems

that may arise. They work in pairs to suggest structured ways in which information could be gathered and analysed. Next, they analyse their organisation's mission statement and their departmental objectives to decide on the implications for training and development. You then introduce the participants to the concepts of SWOT and PEST. They work in groups of three or four to practise analysing a SWOT report from a training and development perspective. When they have completed the exercise, a representative from each group makes a short presentation of their findings. At intervals during the activity, the participants work on their own action plans and finally, they each contribute one key learning or action point. You conclude by covering the key learning points of the activity.

A brief glance at any of the literature on LNA reveals a bewildering variety of LNA methods. The very names used, such as Repertory Grid and Critical Incident Technique, make the trainer or line manager start to wonder whether it actually is rocket science after all. To put it into perspective, there are many ways of identifying and analysing learning needs. You do not need to use them all; in fact, you do not need to know more than the bare minimum about most of them.

A brief examination of the methods available will help you to narrow it down to the ones that will suit you and your organisation. A closer look at those you have short listed will help you to make your final choices.

Broadly, there are some methods of LNA that should be used on an ongoing or regular basis - for example, informal observation - and some that will be used periodically as part of a specific LNA project - for example, analysis of the annual appraisals.

There are some methods that will be used for all staff - for example, questionnaires - and some that will be used for specific groups - for example, assessment/development centres for senior management or fast trackers.

Methods can be stand alone - for example, a one-to-one interview - or several methods can be combined - for example, a one-to-one interview that uses an LNA questionnaire to provide the structure.

There are some LNA activities that rely on action by the trainer - for example, analysing manpower planning data to assess the need for induction training - and some that rely on the line manager noting that development in participating in meetings is needed. Others rely on the individual proactively thinking about and requesting development. *The most effective identification and analysis of learning needs occurs when all three of these key people work together in harmony with each other and within a supportive organisation.*

You begin this training exercise by explaining that there is a wide variety of LNA methods available and that the choice, and even the names of some of them, can sometimes be bewildering. The participants then give their ideas of the generic benefits of a well conducted LNA, before working in pairs to suggest as many methods of LNA as they can think of. You lead a feedback session and then name all of the main methods. Next, participants concentrate on six specific methods and work in pairs to identify the advantages and disadvantages of each LNA method and the circumstances in which they could most appropriately be used. You coach during the training exercise, then take feedback. Finally, you run a quiz involving all the participants to check for understanding before concluding with a review of the key learning points of the training exercise.

When to carry out an LNA

Learning needs analysis (LNA) is an ongoing process. Listening to colleagues, maintaining awareness of business activities and monitoring the impact of current training and development will ensure that constantly evolving learning needs are identified. In addition to this continuous process, there will be occasions when formal LNA programmes will be needed to support specific changes or developments. A formal LNA programme could be needed for a range of circumstances - for example, when an individual staff member is promoted to their first managerial position or, on a larger scale, when hundreds of staff are expected to change roles as part of the centralisation of administration procedures. This activity encourages participants to identify when LNA should take place to ensure that they adopt a proactive approach to planning their LNA programme. During the activity, participants will actually book estimated LNA time into their diaries.

You begin by telling the participants that they are going to consider when to carry out LNA. To help them deal with this large and sometimes vague area, you will introduce them to a structured approach which examines LNA in relation to four different levels: the organisation as a whole; individual departments; individuals; the job. The participants then work in pairs to identify situations that would require LNA. For each situation they decide whether or not it could have been foreseen and what would be the best method of dealing with it at the most appropriate time. You then lead a feedback session taking two or three responses from each pair before moving on to explore the range of examples in Handout 3.4 Situations where LNA is required - solutions. Next, the participants work in groups of three or four to list as many situations as possible where LNA is required and place them in two categories; those that can be foreseen and planned for, and those that arise unexpectedly. You take feedback on their findings, then continue by asking them to work individually to identify situations in which they will be personally involved and to book estimated LNA time into their diaries. The activity concludes with a review of the key learning points.

Planning for the LNA

LNA, like all other projects, needs careful planning to ensure that the resources required, such as time and manpower, have been assessed, will be available and will be used to maximum effect. Careful and accurate planning will enable those responsible for LNA to assess their commitments, and forecast their resource needs objectively and professionally. This will reduce the amount of fire-fighting that needs to be done. LNA projects can vary dramatically in content and size. This activity ensures that participants will think about all the aspects of planning an LNA project by working with the example of planning the analysis of appraisal documentation. It will require them to work hard throughout the session on tasks that will include taskboarding a project; a method that ensures the planning is done in a logical manner. This activity is a brief and sharply focused examination of a particular element of the project management process - planning. It does not attempt to cover project management as a whole. You may wish to take this opportunity to promote your project management courses if this appropriate.

You begin by emphasising that although careful and accurate planning is essential for all LNA projects, the longer the project, the more people are likely to be involved and the more important planning becomes. You then talk briefly about various planning methods before fully explaining 'taskboarding'. The participants then work in groups on a mini-project to bring the theory to life. Next, the participants remain in

their groups to work on a longer project - the LNA of 100 appraisal documents. Finally, the groups present their plans, explaining why decisions have been made. You close the activity by discussing the key learning points and thanking the participants for their hard work.

The design of the learning needs analysis questionnaire is crucial if the right information, in sufficient depth, is to be gathered. The questionnaire needs to be long enough to gather the necessary information while still remaining as concise as possible. It needs to gather information in a way that lends itself to straightforward analysis while still allowing participants to respond as fully as is necessary. It needs to avoid bias, leading questions, offending people and double-barrelled questions. It must also be user friendly and present the questions in a logical manner.

This brief overview of the dos and don'ts of questionnaire design gives us an idea of how meticulous we need to be in our approach. However, the very fact that there are so many tried and tested dos and don'ts means that an excellent questionnaire design guidance framework already exists. This activity encourages participants to examine the dos and don'ts of questionnaire design, along with some of the pitfalls that face the designer, and to put this knowledge into practice.

You introduce the activity by explaining the purpose of the LNA questionnaire and discussing who will make use of it. You then move on to examine the dos, don'ts and possible pitfalls of questionnaire design.

Next, you guide participants through the design of the LNA questionnaire, explaining fully its three parts: the introductory, central and concluding sections.

Now that participants have an understanding of how to construct the LNA questionnaire, you provide an opportunity for them to put their learning into practice.

Working in pairs they develop examples of the three sections of the LNA questionnaire. You coach during the exercise, and then lead a brief feedback session. Conclude the activity by asking each participant to contribute one or two key learning points.

