

Effective learning needs analysis (LNA) plays an essential role in ensuring that the training and development solutions offered to individuals, teams and across the organisation are relevant, timely and effective. In the 9th of 12 articles, Sarah Cook looks at two further means of assessing learning needs - technical tests and one to one interviews.

Technical Tests

One form of analysis of learning and development need that often gets overlooked is technical tests. In many organisations technical tests are used to analyse and assess performance. The results of these tests provide the HR professional with useful data on the learning and development needs of participants.

Technical tests are found in many areas of the business. For example, they can cover Health and Safety regulations, standards required in call handling or compliance in regulated environments such as the Financial Services Industry. In other companies product knowledge tests or tests on enquiry handling are prerequisite as part of induction or to upgrade to another grade or level of responsibility.

In practice there are generally standards that will apply for each type of technical test - either governed by a regulatory body or by the organisation itself. The best people to design and develop technical tests are usually people from the function itself who hold a senior role and are very familiar with the technical nature of the test. Usually these people can work with training and development professionals to develop the test.

For example, one insurance company uses technical tests in its claims department to ensure that employees meet the required standards. The tests are devised by the senior negotiator together with the team leaders of each unit as these people have the most experience of the type and technical nature of claims.

When designing tests of a technical nature it is best practice to ensure that the people who are going to undertake the test are given as much warning as possible about when the test will take place. The test itself needs to take place in a quiet area where people will not be interrupted. Also, ample time needs to be given over to the test and allowances made for people who may need extra time or conditions to complete the test. Do also ensure that the tests are changed on a regular basis so that exactly the same questions are not asked.

The results of technical tests allow the trainer to assess overall trends, strengths and weaknesses both for individuals and for functions taking part in, and the organisation as a whole. This provides a useful insight into future training and development needs.

One organisation for example, used technical test to assess all its training and development employees in the design and delivery of training material. The resulting outputs enabled the business to design development programmes for people who needed to reach the agreed standards.

One to one in-depth interviews

Another form of assessment of learning needs is in-depth one to one interviews. These can take place as part of exploratory research - i.e. at the start of a needs analysis project as well as a stand-alone methodology.

The advantage of face to face interviews is that the HR professional has the opportunity to explore in detail the views and opinions of individuals of their learning and development requirements. However, the disadvantage is that this takes time to do.

The first step is to decide who needs to be interviewed. As this is a time-expensive option, this methodology is often confined to key representatives of the target audience or key stakeholder groups. My preference is to take a 'slice' of the department / function or organisation e.g. people who represent each layer of the department or organisation, are representative of different roles and have been employed in the business for varying lengths of time. The head of department or function will usually be able to provide a steer on who should be involved.

In a business environment the difficulty of one-to-one interviews is getting access to people's diaries, particularly because the discussion can last one to two hours. Therefore it is advisable to give thought to how to introduce the interviewing programme to gain maximum participants one organisation had line managers of the individuals who you wish to interview to personally contact them to explain the importance of the research and to gain their agreement to participate. It is advisable that the line manager is not present during the interview so that the individual can really open up and express their true opinions. My preference is for all one to one interviews to be confidential: i.e. the views of each individual will be amalgamated to provide an overall picture of the learning and development need. Individual views will not be

Using Technical Tests & One to One Interviews to Analyse Performance Gaps

Written by Administrator

Monday, 21 February 2011 11:42 - Last Updated Friday, 25 March 2011 16:30

attributable. In this way, I find that people provide more honest opinions of their learning and development needs. Of course, if you are using one to one interviews with a small group of people to establish individual learning needs, it is advisable to relate the needs to the individual. I would always seek their permission to do this if this was the case at the beginning of the interview.

It is advisable for someone who is skilled in interviewing to conduct in-depth one to one research. The quality of the output of the discussion is dependent on the ability of the interviewer to create rapport with the individual, to probe and identify underlying feelings and nuances.

If using internal or external interviewers to undertake this work, ensure that they have the ability to:

- Build rapport with the interviewee
- Remain neutral
- Use open and probing questions
- Listen actively
- Record outputs accurately

Semi-structured and structured interviews

When using in-depth interviews as part of the learning needs analysis process, the interviewer can adopt a semi-structured or structured approach. With a structured approach the interviewer asks a series of questions that they have pre-determined prior to the interview.

Using a semi-structured interview approach the interviewer has a list of topic areas that they would like to cover but they are prepared to deviate from the agenda to pursue a particular line of thought or expand on an opinion. They prompt through the use of open questions to encourage the individual to provide their opinions on the topic areas and probe to discover underlying reasons and feelings. The interviewer also encourages the interviewee to raise topics which are of importance to them. They are prepared to 'go off piste' i.e. abandon the order of the intended interview if the person has an important issue that they wish to raise.

Whether using a structured or semi-structured approach, the interview needs to create a good

Using Technical Tests & One to One Interviews to Analyse Performance Gaps

Written by Administrator

Monday, 21 February 2011 11:42 - Last Updated Friday, 25 March 2011 16:30

rapport with the individual and show that they are actively listening and capturing their views. One of the skills of interviewing is to accurately record the interview so good note taking is called for. Some HR professionals prefer to take someone with them to record opinions or even to tape the interview with the consent of the individual. In practice I have found it easier to record notes myself as this is less off-putting to the person being interviewed. A tip is to send the individual a copy of the notes after the interview so that they can correct any inaccuracies if you are not sure.

The interviewer needs to establish as part of the introductions the purpose of the research, how the results will be used and whether the person wishes their comments to be attributed or not.

During the interview, although the interviewer has questions to ask, these are prompts for discussion and to draw the person out. The interviewer needs to be an effective listener so they can build on what the individual has to say and probe further e.g. 'You said earlier that the sales person needs to have good organisational skills, what training and development have you had in this area'?

Once the interview has been completed, thank the interviewee and, as with all learning needs analysis projects, keep them in the loop about actions that will be taken as a result.

Here is an example of part of a semi-structured learning needs analysis interview. The questions are prompts for the interviewer to elicit the customer's opinion and probe further.

Example of in-depth interview questions in the business to business market

- Explain who you are, the purpose of the research and how it will be used.
- Explain when the results will be published.
- Clarify whether or not the person wishes to give their comments in confidence.

Using Technical Tests & One to One Interviews to Analyse Performance Gaps

Written by Administrator

Monday, 21 February 2011 11:42 - Last Updated Friday, 25 March 2011 16:30

- How long have you been in your current role?
- What are the key responsibilities and duties you perform in your role?
- What aspects of your work do you find the most easy? And why?
- What aspects of your work do you find the most difficult? And why?
- What training and development have you received in the past 12 months?
- What have you applied from the training you received to your current role?
- What changes are likely to take place that will affect your role in the next 12 months?
- What areas of development would you like to achieve in the next 12 months?
- What aspects of your work would you personally like to improve?
- What other comments would you like to make about your training and development needs?
- Thank the interviewee. Confirm how the results will be used and when they will hear about these.

Analysing in-depth interview results

Using Technical Tests & One to One Interviews to Analyse Performance Gaps

Written by Administrator

Monday, 21 February 2011 11:42 - Last Updated Friday, 25 March 2011 16:30

The results of one to one interviews can be used to identify what is working well and in terms of training and development what needs to be improved on an individual, team or organisational basis. The results can also be used to identify trends and commonly held views and opinions by comparing and contrasting the data.

Owing to the very nature of one to one interviews, it often takes time to draw out patterns and trends. A tip is to include random comments made by interviewees (non-attributed) - the results of the research come to life when you include verbatim remarks.

Summary

Both technical tests and one to one interviews have a role to play in learning needs analysis. Both need skilled input to ensure that the resulting outputs provide a useful and insightful picture of learning needs.

Key learning Points

- Technical tests and one to one interviews are two means of identifying learning needs that are often over looked.
- Technical tests are best designed by people who are experts in the field
- They need to be undertaken in controlled conditions with plenty of notice
- One to one interviews are best offered by a skilled interviewee
- Learning needs interviews can either be structured or service structured in their approach.

{loadposition copyrightmessage}