Qualitative methods such as Focus Groups are a useful starting point for any learning needs analysis. They provide the organisation with views and opinions about the learning and development needs of a cross-section of employees. These can then be verified and substantiated via quantitative methods.

In this article we discuss:

- What are employee focus groups and how they can be established
- The skills of facilitation
- Running a focus group
- Dealing with difficult situations in focus groups

Exploratory research and its benefits

Qualitative research methods such as focus groups allow you to gather data on and explore employees' views and opinions about their learning and development needs. Once you have conducted exploratory, qualitative research you are in a better position to determine whether the learning needs analysis (LNA) that you undertake will need to be supplemented with quantitative hard data. If you conduct a sufficient number of focus groups you may not need to rely on other data as part of the LNA. If, however you rely on only a few focus groups and the scope of the LNA is large, you will certainly need to supplement these.

Employee focus groups

Employee focus groups are investigative research events where up to ten employees meet under the guidance of an expert facilitator to discuss in an open forum their current experience of learning and development and their future needs. Employee focus groups are a useful way of establishing a comprehensive range of opinions on employees' views and opinions about the current training they receive as well as looking at future training and development offerings and improvements.

It is normal practice to employees for focus groups from amongst your target employee population. When recruiting for a focus group it is helpful to consider whether you need to run a
series of focus groups with homogeneous groups e.g. all team leaders together, all managers of a certain grade together etc; or whether you need to mix the group. In my experience, the latter approach is difficult because not only do people at different levels have different needs, but also people can be inhibited in expressing their opinion.

When recruiting participants to focus groups, there are some general rules that apply:

• Recruit participants two to three weeks before the expected focus group meeting so that they can put the date in their diary.

• The optimum number of participants to recruit is 10. Any more than this and it is difficult for people to express their opinion

• Send a letter or email to all those attending explaining the purpose of the event, who will attend, where the focus group will take place

• Expect one or two people not to show up in advance. It is worthwhile calling people before the event to ensure that they are able to attend

• On average, depending on the questions you wish to ask, allow one and a half to two hours as the duration of the focus group

• Provide refreshments. It is important that people feel at ease throughout the session.

• Select a start time that is most suitable to your participants.

**How many focus groups should you run?**

The number of focus groups that you run will be dependent on the size of your audience and
the geographical distribution of your employee base. In practice we find that once the number of focus groups you conduct reaches between six and eight, the same generic themes emerge, though often with regional or unit specific variations. Focus groups are a tangible way of demonstrating to employees at a local level that they and their opinions are important to the organisation. Consideration should also be given therefore to how beneficial it will potentially be to run more focus groups in each location (or clusters of locations).

Running a focus group

Key to the success of a focus group is careful preparation and effective facilitation by an independent moderator.

It is advisable to use a neutral facilitator to run employee groups. In practice it is difficult to remain neutral when employees are commenting on an area of operation in which you are directly involved.

When preparing for the group, consider the topics you wish to cover, the running order and how much time you have. Focus groups last on average between one to two hours depending on the number of topics to be covered.

Start the session with easy, non-controversial topics to get people to open up. It is better to cover general/generic issues before coming on to specifics. Throughout the focus group the facilitator should use open questions to encourage the focus group participants to speak.

Here is the running order for a simple focus group conducted as part of the LNA for a retail chain. The group was run by a neutral facilitator who is a representative of a different part of the organisation so that they can remain independent. You will see that the group discussion was recorded with the permission of those attending. This is so that the facilitator can write up the notes after the session. There are issues of confidentiality when it comes to recording so remember always to get employees permission to do this. As a rule of thumb, all comments from focus groups are not directly attributed as it is an overview of opinions that you are seeking, rather than who exactly said what. Another way I have found useful to ensure that you capture everyone’s opinions and also show participants that you have listened, is to write notes on a flip chart as the focus group takes place.

Example Employee LNA Focus Group Running Order
• Introduction from facilitator

• Welcome & thank people for coming.

• Introduce yourself and your role. Explain that you will act as a neutral facilitator.

• Explain the employee focus group is being held to identify the training and development needs of participants in the forthcoming year.

• Explain that the discussion will last approximately one and a half hours. Invite participants to give their honest opinions as their views are important.

• Explain you will be taking notes / recording the session (turn on tape recorder) so you have a record of their comments - check everyone is OK with this. None of the comments will be attributable.

• Ask participants to introduce themselves, their title and how long they have been with the organisation.

  Lead a discussion around the following broad topics, probing where appropriate:

1. What training and development have you personally undertaken in the past 12 months?

2. What are your opinions on how useful the training and development that you have undertaken was to make you effective in your role? And why?

3. What other training and development do you personally feel you need to help you be effective in your current role? E.g. Skills, knowledge or behaviours
4. What in your opinion are the best methods to acquire these skills, knowledge and behaviours?

5. What organisational, team or personal changes do you anticipate will take place in the next 12 months?

6. What learning and development might you need to address these changes?

- Summarise discussions
- Thank and close

As some people who attend focus groups can sometimes be outspoken, the facilitator needs therefore to ensure that there is a balance of views. This involves making sure that everyone is included and summarising regularly to show that they have actively listened.

**The skills of facilitation**

The facilitator is highly influential in making the focus group run smoothly. Facilitation is the art of 'making things easy'. (From the French word 'facile' easy).

It is advisable to use a trained facilitator to run the focus group. A facilitator is neutral, they do not contribute to the discussion or evaluate what is being said. They do not pass comment or take sides. They are good listeners and use open and probing questions to guide the discussion. They encourage and allow everyone to speak.

At the start of the focus group the facilitator relaxes the group, they make sure that they speak to every member of the group and that they all have a chance to introduce themselves in the first five minutes.
A key part of the skill of the facilitator is being aware of the process of the group - how people are interacting with each other and each person's percentage of airtime. The effective facilitator does not allow one person to dominate the group but asks everyone their views. They draw out quieter members of the group and are not afraid of silence. They summarise on a regular basis and make notes to show that they have taken on board what has been said. They are also aware of and skilled in techniques for dealing with difficult situations.

**Dealing with difficult participants**

There are a number of situations which may present difficulties in focus groups. Bringing together eight to ten participants, many of whom may not know each other can create many different dynamics and social pressures.

If there are members of the focus group who become particularly emotional or outspoken, the facilitator has a number of options available to them:

- Acknowledge the strength of opinion / feeling / emotion

- Summarise the key points to show that they have actively listened

- Ask what other people feel about the topic in an attempt to open up the discussion - Invite the person to speak to you in more depth at the end of the discussion

- Suggest the group takes a short break for refreshments

- Ask the person to let other people speak so that you can record a balance of views

- Divide the group into pairs or trios and ask them to discuss their experiences, then take the views of each of the trios/pairs.
If the group is not very talkative and there are prolonged silences:

- Ask participants to write down the answers to the questions and collect these in

- Divide the group into pairs or trios and ask them to discuss their experiences, then take the views of each of the trios/pairs. Participants may be reluctant to speak in front of people they do not know well

- Use examples of what other people have said to generate discussion e.g. ‘A common complaint about current training offer is ‘.., what are your experiences of this’?

Following up the results of focus groups

Once the focus group has finished, there are a number of actions the facilitator needs to take:

• Write up notes from the focus group and circulate these to the appropriate people. Include key phrases and verbatim used to express feelings and mood.

• Analyse the data and look for trends - break the data down into issues which need to be addressed at a specific level and those which are more generic.

• Decide whether you need to hold further focus groups or send out questionnaires to other people to substantiate the focus group findings.

• Discuss and agree specific actions arising from the focus group.

• Thank the focus group participants and let them know the subsequent action that will be taken.

Key learning points
• Employee focus groups are a useful means of exploring views and opinions around learning and development needs.

• Focus groups can be run as a stand alone method of learning needs analysis if sufficient numbers of groups are run.

• Alternatively focus groups can be a form of exploratory research that provides a platform for subsequent quantitative research.

• To be effective, experienced facilitators should run focus groups to ensure that all views and opinions are welcomed.

• Focus group facilitators should be aware of how to deal with difficult situations to ensure equal levels of participation.

• Following the focus group the facilitator needs to write up the outputs and identify trends.

Sarah Cook is Managing Director of Service Excellence and Leadership Consultancy, The Stairway Consultancy Ltd, she can be contacted on 01628 526535.