

Sage Construction and Real Estate

Performing a Needs Analysis



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Introduction

Needs assessments can be applied to a variety of functions in the construction firm—from figuring out what kind of technology the company requires to a service that could open your business up to work in new construction markets to assessing an employee's performance and what training he could benefit from. Once you've decided that it's time to conduct a needs analysis, you will be working to determine exactly what your company has to do to drive improvements in its operations.

The analysis is a process of amassing all your company's goals, desires, wishes, and needs.¹ It may take into consideration what your clients want and need—have they requested work in the past that the company was incapable of performing, either due to a lack of resources, time, equipment, or skills? Was it a project that you wanted? If so, add what would be necessary to be capable of that work to your needs analysis.

This time can also be used to help the company focus its efforts. According to Amie Casper of Brigham Young University's linguistics department, "the information gleaned from a needs analysis can be used to help you define program goals."¹

There are several types of and methods for conducting need assessments. These include: performance or gap analysis, or whether the company is lacking in something; and feasibility analysis, which measures if the benefits of making changes will outweigh the current deficiency.²

Conducting a needs assessment

"The needs analysis is usually the first step taken to cause a change," explains Hasan Saleem for the DIR Journal.³ "This is mainly because a needs analysis specifically defines the gap between the current and the desired individual and organizational performances."

Saleem notes that the process has to be well—organized and systematic, with those leading the analysis working in stages, reviewing the results from one step before proceeding to the next one.

"Each particular situation requires its own mix of observing, probing, analyzing, and deducing," the author notes.³

Who can perform the analysis? Anyone who knows how the organization operates on a daily basis can conduct the assessment—it doesn't have to be an outside technology, human resources, or financial expert.⁴ Get feedback from your staff as well, as they may identify a need that the higher—ups never knew existed.

So how do you determine what the workforce needs? First, consider observing the different departments in the company—the accounting division or the workers laboring on—site, for instance—and interview the employees while you're there.⁵ Running focus groups can also be a great opportunity to brainstorm and collect opinions, as can handing out surveys and questionnaires. If you get resistance from the participants, remember that communication is key. Explain to them exactly what you hope to gain from the needs assessment and how they will benefit from it in the future.

1 http://linguistics.byu.edu/resources/volunteers/TESOLBYU_NeedsAnalysis.htm

2 http://media.wiley.com/product_data/excerpt/57/07879752/0787975257.pdf

3 <http://www.dirjournal.com/guides/how-to-conduct-a-training-needs-analysis/>

4 http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/tech_suite/part_2.asp

5 <http://www.csc.noaa.gov/needs/>

How to do your needs analysis

Whether you're discussing the construction firm's current technology suite, its workforce's skill levels or its financial standing, the needs assessment should be able to reveal what should be done to enable the company to operate at its maximum potential.⁴

Ivan Walsh, an online marketing consultant with a background in IT, explains that there are five basic stages in a needs statement. First, you must identify the problem, then decipher the cause, calculate the cost, devise a strategy and finally, identify the barriers.⁶ These can be broken down into more manageable steps, such as those one contractor took to figure out how he could make project and accounting information flow more smoothly between the back office and the remote worksites.

Step One: If you have not done so already, create a business plan, as this will serve as the framework for the needs analysis, facilitate long-term planning, and be a reference point for where you are versus where you want to be. The contractor knew he wanted to take on bigger projects and increase revenue but didn't know what kind of investments—in software, in labor—he would have to make to get there.

Step Two: Identify the problem. The contractor found that there were times when key project information would get lost in translation between the back office and the foremen on site. While those kinds of hiccups were manageable with smaller jobs, he'd need to be more organized to accept the bigger projects.

Step Three: Find the cause. In the contractor's case, the communication problem stemmed from not having an easy way to track everything that was going on in a project—important papers were getting lost, and stakeholders weren't being told when there was a change.

Step Four: Start gathering all your needs—related information, surveying managers, laborers, and administrative staff. But be on guard for participants who either have no interest in the project or too much—they may end up under/overstating what they require to do their jobs.⁴ The contractor asked administrative staff, foremen, project managers, and laborers what problems they saw in current operations.

Step Five: Make a list. After collecting the details, the contractor sorted through them to prioritize the most pressing needs: a better way to share information and keep it from getting lost.

Step Six: Sketch out how the goals can be accomplished. The contractor found that investing in document management and project management solutions would help his company get organized.

Step Seven: Get an outsider's perspective. The contractor consulted with technology vendors and partners to get a sense of what solutions could help his business.

Step Eight: Double-check your findings. By talking with an expert, the contractor ended up discovering needs that he didn't realize he had or that had not come up during the earlier assessment, so he added those to the list and reprioritized which issues that needed to be addressed first.

⁴ http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/tech_suite/part_2.asp

⁶ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ivanwalsh/4011276190/>

Step Nine: Document everything. From there, the company started documenting the analysis, outlining exactly what the reviewers found and what the plan was to fulfill those needs. This statement can address both material needs—a new accounting system, an updated fleet—and functional ones.⁴

Step Ten: Weigh the pros and cons. Once the contractor had an idea of what he needed to purchase or upgrade, he ran a cost/benefits analysis. After identifying a need and a solution that could solve it, he had to determine whether he could afford the price tag. Ask yourself: Will the positive effects outweigh the current problems that are being caused by not having the solution?

How it benefits construction firms

Taking the time to figure out exactly what tools and processes will make your company run more efficiently, smoothly, and inexpensively and will lead to cost savings and increased revenues in the long run.

Construction firms are already strapped for cash and resources—with every person, piece of equipment, and project being vital to the company's success—and a small investment of time and money now will bring improvements that will last for years into the future.

Conclusion

Construction companies are looking to see how they can expand their businesses and make up for lost time. However, before launching a blind expansion initiative, it is necessary to take stock of your company's current skill levels, capabilities, financial standing, and technological state. If you want to achieve the goals you have made, conducting a needs analysis is the first step in figuring out exactly what you need to do to get there.

⁴ http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/tech_suite/part_2.asp

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