

Why to Define Learning Needs

(adapted from a presentation by Dr. Ian Bell)

The purpose of professional training is to develop the competence of individuals so that they can contribute to meeting the goals of the organizations in which they work. Careful and clear definition of learning needs is the first step in ensuring that training will have valued impacts.

What do we mean by Learning Needs?

The illustration to the right shows the levels of influence on the training process. Let's walk through them one at a time, and see how Learning Needs fit within this larger context.

Every organization is driven by its mission and the **organizational goals** that help it achieve that mission. These goals are why the organization exists. They are established by the needs of clients and stakeholders, the governmental context, and organizational programmes and initiatives. They are also influenced by individual managers, and by the recommendations of experts in the domain. These goals might be expressed in annual reports, strategic plans, and the mission and goal statements of the organization.

Organizations resources, in the form of human talent and infrastructural technologies, data, and systems, are acquired or established in order to meet the organizational goals.

Job competencies are determined by job responsibilities required to meet organizational goals. They are composed of the underlying skills and background knowledge required to perform a specific job. Competencies can be either formally defined or described in job descriptions. Job competencies are usually defined by a combination of stakeholders, including managers, experts, customers, and the staff members themselves.

Learning needs are the skills and knowledge (competencies) that individuals must develop in order to successfully perform their jobs. Learning needs are defined as the gaps between current competency levels and required minimum levels. However, competence also grows continually throughout an individual's career.

Finally, **training delivery** includes the methods used to help individuals develop competence. These methods include learning solutions and delivery modes, from formal classroom and online events to on-the-job coaching and mentoring, as well as the learning strategies and activities used in formal training events.

The relationships between these organizational elements is important for determining the required training activities and evaluating the quality of the training enterprise (see diagram below). Training requirements are determined by the organizational goals, resources acquired, and defined competencies. In addition, the quality of training delivery can be measured by how it impacts the development of competencies and, ultimately, how it helps the organization achieve its goals.



