

When Urgency to Launch Your Training Initiative Means
There Isn't Time for Comprehensive Analysis –

There is an ANSWER.

ANSWER Analysis – Rapid Needs Assessment

The Question

If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster. – Stephen R. Covey

The first step in implementing a corporate training initiative has always been to launch a comprehensive needs assessment to establish the goals, objectives and scope of the training project. However, as the pace of business has accelerated and the size of training budgets has shrunk, too often training departments can find themselves pressured to begin development of initiatives without having established these key metrics. In the long run this can lead to ineffective and poorly adopted training that fails to meet the goals it was designed to achieve.

Marketing professionals have long relied on the well known SWOT Analysis at the beginning of large projects to ensure they're on the right path. The SWOT provides a framework to rapidly outline and assess the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to a project and use those metrics to set the goals, objectives and strategies for achieving success with those marketing campaigns.

This begs the question - Is it possible to apply an assessment framework, similar to the SWOT, to the needs of training and learning professionals and still deliver detailed, topical information that helps ensure the success of training initiatives? We think there's an ANSWER.

The ANSWER

The ANSWER Analysis is designed to meet the need for this type of rapid needs assessment, and was developed through the collaboration of experienced professionals from both the training and marketing industries. Mirroring the simplicity of SWOT, the ANSWER Analysis uses a series of steps to rapidly collect information required by training professionals to develop course solutions that satisfy the specific needs of their learners.

ANSWER is designed to be completed in as little as 2-3 hours for smaller projects, or 3-5 days for larger projects. Thus, corporate decision makers are able to secure valuable information in far less time than conventional needs assessments, and they're empowered to make better decisions in directing employee and business improvement initiatives.

The first step in executing an ANSWER Analysis involves organizing a panel of 7 key stakeholders, including senior level personnel, subject matter experts (SMEs), and targeted employees. This group then comes together in a collaborative and creative way to map out the six ANSWER criteria; which are:

- A**udience
- N**eeds
- S**uccesses
- W**eaknesses
- E**xisting content and expertise
- R**esults

The screenshot shows the ANSWER Analysis form, a structured template for gathering information about training needs and organizational context. The form is divided into six main sections, each with a specific question and a corresponding input area:

- Audience:** what makes your learners unique? (Input area with horizontal lines)
- Needs:** what needs will be met by this initiative? (Input area with columns for 'business' and 'learner', each containing a vertical list of dots)
- Successes:** what has worked well for your organization in the past? (Input area with horizontal lines)
- Weaknesses:** what has gone wrong in the past? (Input area with horizontal lines)
- Expertise:** what existing know-how and source material is available? (Input area with columns for 'people' and 'materials', each containing a vertical list of dots)
- Results:** how will you measure the success of this initiative? (Input area with a numbered list: 1. Learner Response, 2. Learning Retention, 3. Learner Performance, 4. Organizational Change, 5. Organizational Value)

The form also includes the AllenCommunication logo and the text 'ANSWER Analysis' and 'www.allencom.com' at the top.

The ANSWER Methodology

The group should conduct a literature review of existing training materials, job descriptions, organizational charts, policy manuals and industry literature pertaining related to the initiative. This presents an understanding of how comprehensive and reliable the content source material may be for the training developers.

The literature review is followed by the ANSWER Analysis session where the group completes the 6 criteria.

Audience.

List the unique attributes of the learners. Be sure to include: the learners' responsibilities during a typical workday, their motivators, courses they've completed, their typical educational background or training, and their demographic makeup. Then use the list to map out the needs and objectives of each learner group.

Needs.

Once the audience map is complete a complex breakdown of needs will begin to emerge. Have a brainstorming discussion of the needs represented by each stakeholder in the panel. This needs list should differentiate corporate and learner needs. Empirical data supporting each need should also be considered. Then map intersections between learner and corporate needs to establish goals and objectives.

Successes.

Give a report on successes the organization has had with past learning initiatives. If a training element has worked well in the past, it may be beneficial to incorporate it into future plans.

Weaknesses.

Discussing weaknesses and failures from past courses will identify the elements that need to be avoided in future training initiatives. Be sure to list which training methods and practices have been ineffective. Would a past ILT course have been more impactful as a blended or as a WBT course? Did a module not have enough learner interaction? Maybe the PowerPoint training was boring and a flash presentation would cause better learner retention? Retrying failed approaches won't make them better the second time around.

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Existing content and expertise.

Determine what raw material, instructional content, SMEs and information is already available to repurpose. This will help expedite the development process. It makes little sense to build a new initiative from scratch, when most of the components may already be prepared. Then, list all the data and the material that will be required and match it with the list of existing resources to identify gaps that need filling.

Results.

Establish the expectation of what the optimal results should be and determine the metrics of success for the new initiative. A good practice is to ask what should be present on the course final report. Also make sure that each training project has a link to the needs and goals identified in this exercise. This is the point in which to determine if the initiative will lead the business on the right or wrong direction.

The ANSWER Report

Of course, before you can act on the discoveries and decisions made during the session, you must document them. Immediately following the meeting, the notes should be synthesized into a report that you can use as you work on the initiative.

Because the ANSWER Analysis is centered on a single meeting with a small group of people, it's not designed to replace longer, more formal analysis activities, but to be a starting point. Depending on the complexity and business implications of your training initiative, you may choose to follow the ANSWER Analysis session with some additional data-gathering activities. Additional analysis incorporating a larger pool of data can help you validate the assumptions made during the ANSWER Analysis and further refine your approach.

The Allen Way

Why do we think the ANSWER Analysis will work?

Simple, we designed it and we use it every day.

ANSWER was developed by experts at Allen Communication Learning Services using best practices from our 30 year history in performance improvement and instructional design. Using ANSWER, Allen Communication has helped hundreds of companies in diverse industries such as insurance, finance, manufacturing, technology and direct sales effectively improve employee performance, increase sales revenues, and optimize business processes.

To learn more about how Allen Communication, and the ANSWER Analysis, can help your business get to the right place faster, contact us at:

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