n the last two decades, the practice of needs assessment (NA) has been extensively documented, particularly in books concerning its theoretical underpinnings and ways to implement and conduct NA in real-world settings. For example, in 1984, Witkin published a widely recognized and used tome on the topic, notable for its extensive and thorough review of the literature. Witkin’s work was followed in 1987 by McKillip’s text, with similar efforts coming from the 1990s to the present day. (The reader is referred to well-known books of Kaufman, Rojas, & Mayer, 1993; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995; Soriano, 1995; Reviere, Berkowitz, Carter, & Ferguson, 1996; Altschuld & Witkin, 1999; Gupta, 1999; Kaufman, 1999; and Kaufman, Oakley-Brown, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003.) Going further back in the literature one would find earliest writings on NA in human performance technology, the most prominently of these including Kaufman (1972, 1988) and Warheit, Bell, and Schwab (1979).

Consistent across all sources is a common emphasis of the meaning of the word need. It is a noun and stands for the measured discrepancy or gap between two conditions—the “what should be” or desired status of an entity and the “what is” or its current status. Witkin (1984) notes that confusion arises when the word is used as a verb in a sentence or phrase like “A needs X.” The latter represents a solution strategy rather than a discrepancy. NA is the process of identifying needs, prioritizing them, using the information so obtained to make needs-based decisions, allocating resources, and implementing actions within organizations to resolve problems underlying high-priority needs.
These seemingly simple descriptions of need and NA become increasingly complex on closer examination. The “what should be” condition is almost always value driven. Different versions of how statements are scaled on NA surveys include “What should be?” “What ought to be?” “What ideally should be?” “What is likely to be?” “What is expected to be?” “What is feasible?” “What is minimally acceptable?” and so forth. Different wordings can lead to different perceptions of need. This underscores the issue of whether we are dealing with true needs or something better referred to as wants. There are also alternative, although complementary, models or approaches for how needs are assessed and the structure of the assessment.

**Levels of Need**

Kaufman’s Organizational Elements Model (OEM) focuses on three basic levels of needs or discrepancies (Kaufman 1972, 1999; Kaufman et al., 1993; Kaufman et al., 2003). The first is the external or Macro level—the needs of society and the larger environment. These needs must be assessed first and concern outcomes delivered within the society in which we all live and in which we make our contributions (self-sufficiency, self-reliance, etc.). Following this, Macro level needs should be addressed—those needs relating to the nature of outputs generated by our institutions and organizations. At the Macro level, we could think of how well organizations are delivering results of benefit to the organization itself and to its partners. Such considerations are critical, for without them Macro level results could never be delivered. The Micro level deals with the results accomplished by individual performers and teams that organizations use to achieve the Macro level and, in turn, the Mega level. At each level, the discrepancy between “what is” and “what should be” must be determined. The OEM’s strengths lie in its systems orientation, its clarity in establishing focus of the NA process, and the substantive thinking underlying the three levels.

Other ways of characterizing needs and NA have been proposed. Cohen (1981), from the standpoint of social agencies and social services, divided NA into two categories—procedures for mobilizing support across various constituency groups and procedures for resource allocation. Witkin developed a process model of NA containing three phases and emphasizing three levels of need (1984). That model and the three levels were revisited by Witkin and Altschuld (1995) and again by Altschuld and Witkin (1999). There are three phases:

**Phase 1—Pre-assessment.** This phase involves getting organized and focusing on potential areas of concern, finding out what is already known or available about the foci, and deciding to collect in-depth information in a formal NA (Phase 2). Other decisions that could result from pre-assessment are stopping the NA process because the need is not there or concluding that enough is known about needs to proceed to Phase 3 (planning actions to resolve inherent problems).

**Phase 2—Needs assessment.** Conducting an extensive, formal NA predicated on what is and what is not learned in Phase 1, determining the relative priorities of needs, and conducting causal analyses of needs to identify possible solution strategies are all tasks involved in the actual NA.

**Phase 3—Post-assessment.** Phase 3 involves moving from knowledge of high-priority needs and their causal factors into designing and implementing solutions within organizational frameworks and evaluating the results of the solution(s) as well as the overall NA process itself.

Intertwined throughout the three phases are three levels of need. Level 1 is that of the direct recipient of services, Level 2 represents the needs of service providers, and Level 3 is the nature of what is required by the system that supports service providers and service recipients. Level 1 needs are always foremost, with Levels 2 and 3 existing to serve Level 1.

Although the terms and terminology are somewhat different, there is a good deal of consistency among the writings of many of the authors cited in the introduction to this article. A close inspection of major points indicates that the concept of discrepancy is always key to the discussion of needs and needs assessment. The NA effort has to be focused, the purpose for conducting an NA clear, and the rationale for expending limited resources for the process unambiguous for all involved parties. In short, the landscape of NA is well-established and easily accessed through the literature.

Even some of the problems in the field have been categorized and documented. Altschuld and Witkin described difficulties in defining or establishing the “what should be” condition, measuring the “what is” status, determining discrepancies from the two states based on measurements that tend to be flawed, and using multiple methods in NA studies (1999). At the same time, more recent writings show slow but noticeable changes in perceptions of NA, concepts related to it, and how NA efforts are being implemented. They are almost imperceptible, slowly mutating features of the landscape, and they foretell what might happen over time with regard to the practice of NA.

**Emerging Dimensions of Needs Assessment**

Figure 1 shows six emerging dimensions of NA. The dimensions are not exhaustive, but rather demonstrate how the field is evolving or should evolve. As is obvious from a cursory examination of the table, NA is more than a technical act led by an external consultant who disappears from the scene when the formal collection and analysis of needs data are completed. More important, NA should be thought of as
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION OF THE DIMENSION</th>
<th>COMMENTARY</th>
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<tr>
<td>NA or Evaluation</td>
<td>Many times groups do not understand or know what they really require—NA or evaluation. Needs assessors frequently have to probe to determine if an NA is warranted, if part of one (causal analysis, solution strategy, etc.) would be of interest, or if the sponsor really wants an evaluation.</td>
<td>This confusion was evident in the initial questions to ask of a sponsor found in the Program Evaluation Kit (Herman, Morris, &amp; Fitzgibbon, 1987). Renewed interest in how to initiate the process is evident in the work of Watkins and Guerra (2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset Assessment (Capacity Building) or NA</td>
<td>Rather than starting from a discrepancy, deficit, or gap approach, would it be more beneficial to begin by defining strengths and assets? Building on strengths rather than deficits should be more positive and uplifting.</td>
<td>The focus of NA always seems to be negative in that it centers on problems and deficiencies. The stress is on asset assessment, capacity building, and leveraging strengths as a better way to go, especially in dealing with social issues and problems within communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrument Decay in NA</td>
<td>Most findings in NA, especially those from NA surveys, decay and become less valid with the passage of time. Since situations for needs and needs-based solutions are constantly evolving, questions arise as to how long the findings will have utility.</td>
<td>Surveys are the most commonly used instrumentation in NA, yet little empirical research has been done on their quality and the longevity of results. Research conducted by the extension service in regard to training needs and the predictive quality of surveys over time has broken new ground for NA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA and Solution Strategy—An Artificial Separation</td>
<td>Groups tend to be disposed to move prematurely to solution strategies before having analyzed needs and their causes. This tendency can lead to not fully understanding needs, not considering the prioritization process in depth, and selecting less than optimum solution strategies.</td>
<td>Keep groups on task and focused on needs initially, not solutions. Hunt et al. (2002) devised a clever way to include both needs and solutions on NA surveys based on long-term exposure to a setting. The potential payoff in such situations would be better support for solution implementation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement of Multiple Levels of the Organization in the NA</td>
<td>All pertinent levels of an organization from top management to those who directly deliver service should be included in an NA. The idea is to minimize conflict and even the withholding of information (from lower levels to the more superior ones) so that good (valid and meaningful) needs data are produced.</td>
<td>The general wisdom here is to be very careful in soliciting input across levels, especially when using small group techniques (e.g., don't mix levels in focus group interviews and nominal groups). An interesting and different example of how this problem was dealt with in a large state organization NA was explained by Holton et al. (2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA and the Organizational Action Plan</td>
<td>NAs by themselves are of no value unless organizational action plans are developed and implemented to resolve needs. Needs assessors are, in many instances, outside consultants hired to guide the NA process. Their ability to influence and facilitate actual change inside an institution or agency can be attenuated and quite different from leading the more technical aspects of NA.</td>
<td>This almost-hidden aspect of NA led Altschuld and Witkin (1999) to re-evaluate their model and to extensively modify how they see needs assessors working in organizational contexts. Control and buy-in to an action orientation by the organization is essential.</td>
</tr>
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Figure 1. A Sample of Emergent Dimensions in Needs Assessment.
an activity conducted by and for organizations that leads to organizational change and improvement. That improvement must always be viewed in terms of the outcomes or services delivered to Level 1 individuals and groups.

In the first row of the figure, the concern or question is “What is the sponsor asking for?” Is it an NA or an evaluation? The answer often is not clear and needs assessors have to probe to find what is expected. Sponsors often have vague ideas of what kinds of service would be most beneficial to them and why. They do not always have clear expectations of what evaluation and needs assessment are, the relationships between them, what each activity can do for them, or even of what the focus or topic of such activities should be.

In these types of situations, the needs assessors have to conduct what might be thought of as reconnaissance to delineate the parameters of what to do and what would be helpful to the sponsor or group wanting assistance. This is usually done by questioning sponsors or might be accomplished by using a modification of a survey technique recently proposed by Watkins and Guerra (2002). They devised an instrument containing two sets of items (even and odd numbered)—one focusing on NA and the other on evaluation. Evaluation questions, for example, might deal with learning about outcomes, whereas NA questions stress planning programs and finding directions. Different groups of stakeholders could take the survey and their scores on even and odd items would be summed to give an indication of whether an evaluation or an NA is preferred. Such an approach could be an excellent way to help needs assessors determine how best to proceed with clients.

Turning to the second row, some may feel that when needs are emphasized, it creates a sense of dwelling on the negative, the focus being on problems and what’s “wrong.” In working with large communities, that sense can be discouraging. Negative feelings, can seem to sour the environment, and most likely will not elevate or motivate communities to action. An alternative approach—one that might energize rather than disable and dispirit—is to focus on the strengths and resources of the community and how they can be expanded on and mobilized. Strengths could be thought of in terms of cultural, ecological, social, economic, and other resources.

Particularly in assessments that start from the asset or capacity-building base of communities, community members are involved in the data-collection process. They might participate in decisions about what should be collected by means of discussions about their knowledge of the community (Issel & Searing, 2002). They might act as data collectors seeking information about community strengths and available resources. They would help in compiling lists of assets, which in turn would become the linchpin for planning and activity. Decisions would still have to be made about what to do, where to direct efforts building on strengths, and what to capitalize on, but the starting point in asset assessment would be radically different from traditional NA.

Instrument decay (third row in the figure) is a serious problem in NA studies. Questions arise such as “What is the quality of our surveys? For how long are the results valid?” and “Are the results predictive of important needs? If we attend to the needs derived from survey data, will meaningful programs be produced that are attractive to, welcomed by, and used by Level 1 recipients?”

Most needs assessors intuitively know or recognize the importance of addressing these types of issues, but they seldom do anything to resolve them. Malmshemer and Germain (2002) conducted a study to examine the predictive validity of surveys for training needs in the extension service. They also wanted to get some idea or estimate of the “shelf life” of the data collected this way. They used various forms of wording and compared actual attendance at training sessions with survey responses. One finding in their circumstance was that only 17% of those who said they would attend training sessions actually did so. While they could not directly ascertain what the shelf life might be, it seems that 18-24 months is a possible range in this particularized organizational setting (by the current author’s inference). If this finding were to transfer to other situations and institutions, it would suggest that needs assessors should commonly revisit and update NA surveys every 18-24 months. This study has great importance for the conduct of NAs and should be replicated in more varied institutional environments.

A common sense argument and one that was strongly endorsed by Witkin and Altschuld (1995) is that NAs should first look at needs, not solutions (see the fourth row). Needs assessors should identify and understand needs before prematurely jumping to solution strategies. Solutions divert attention if interjected too early in the NA process.

This is a constant theme in NA. A project by Hunt, Meyers, Davies, Meyers, Grogg, and Neel (2002) successfully combined needs and solutions in a single survey. They based this combination on the notion of empowering a community. Possible explanations of the success of this project are that the authors had prolonged and persistent exposure at the site and that they were constantly interacting with diverse, but committed stake-holding groups. Their perception was that the groups had a strong investment in the problem area. Having both solutions and need areas on the survey responses actually did so. While they could not directly ascertain what the shelf life might be, it seems that 18-24 months is a possible range in this particularized organizational setting (by the current author’s inference). If this finding were to transfer to other situations and institutions, it would suggest that needs assessors should commonly revisit and update NA surveys every 18-24 months. This study has great importance for the conduct of NAs and should be replicated in more varied institutional environments.
be plausible to employ such an approach, depending on the needs assessors’ relationships with various groups and the circumstances of the specific situation. Certainly, while it does offer another option for conducting NAs, it is one that might be used with caution.

In NA studies conducted in large organizations, needs assessors will undoubtedly confront the issue of levels within the organization (fifth row in figure). For example, when using the nominal group (a small group) technique to collect information, subordinates may feel concerned when superiors are included in the group. They might tend to avoid revealing their honest thoughts because of fear, lack of empowerment, and implied or perceived threats of reprisals.

Holton, Bates, and Naquin (2000) devised an interesting way to involve multiple levels in a large-scale NA training done for a state agency. Using multiple methods, they implemented a strategic NA with administrators (a top-down approach) as well as a “maintenance type of skills” NA with employees (a bottom-up approach on needs). Their research suggests ways in which data might be combined, as well as the problems that can and will probably occur when needs assessor’s are confronted with the complexities of levels and data from multiple sources and methods.

Last, consider the implications of the final dimension displayed in the final row of the table. NA is much more than a technical undertaking. As needs assessors, we must begin to internalize what we are doing beyond the technical part of the job. While that part is not unimportant, nor should it be minimized, it is only a segment of a larger mosaic and, by itself, falls far short of what the NA process can or should do.

The results of NA could have a fundamental, major, and even profound impact on how an organization goes about its business. NAs can affect jobs, relationships among staff members, the balance of power, allocations of resources, and many other aspects of organizational life. How do we help to translate the findings from NAs into strategies to improve processes, products, and programs or go in new directions? How do we guide and facilitate organizations to change and grow? What is our role beyond the technical part of the job? Have we fully considered the nature of needs assessment so fewer of our efforts go unused? Put more directly, we may have to think more deeply about the deli cate fabric of the NA enterprise.

Conclusion

NA is a basic process for humans and organizations. Discrepancy assessment or NA, though often called by different names, is a common activity that is similar in structure across fields such as education, health care, and engineering (Hansen, 1991). Whether as individuals or collectives, we act depending on real or perceived needs.

Given that NA is inherent in practically all we do, that it guides our actions as humans and as organizations, and that a lot is known about it, what conclusions can be drawn from this brief discussion of the emerging dimensions?

- More research about technical facets of NA—such as survey quality and utility, how to start the process, and combining needs and solution strategies—is desirable. We need better-thought-out research studies that are published and accessible to the NA community.
- Asset building and NA should not be seen as opposed to each other, but instead as complementary, and NAs should include asset and resource assessment strategies.
- More features of organizational behavior and development and how to establish dialogue about NA processes and results should be incorporated into our efforts, for they ultimately will entail organizational change.
- Concurrent with conducting needs assessments, we must also look at an organization’s commitment and willingness to change. The issue of multiple levels of involvement is critical and must be better understood.
- We should re-examine the NA process, especially how we budget for NA. Clearly what once looked like a process that was easy to understand and implement can be much more complex than originally perceived. Also, since the process is more than just technical, the assessors’ involvement and role may continue beyond planning the assessment, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting findings. Setting aside some part of the dollar resources for this possibility would likely be a wise investment.

References


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