Training Need Assessment

An inspirational HandBook for designers of learning processes
Strategic capacity building in companies and institutions: - the first step

By Hróbjartur Árnason with Stig Skovbo

Contents

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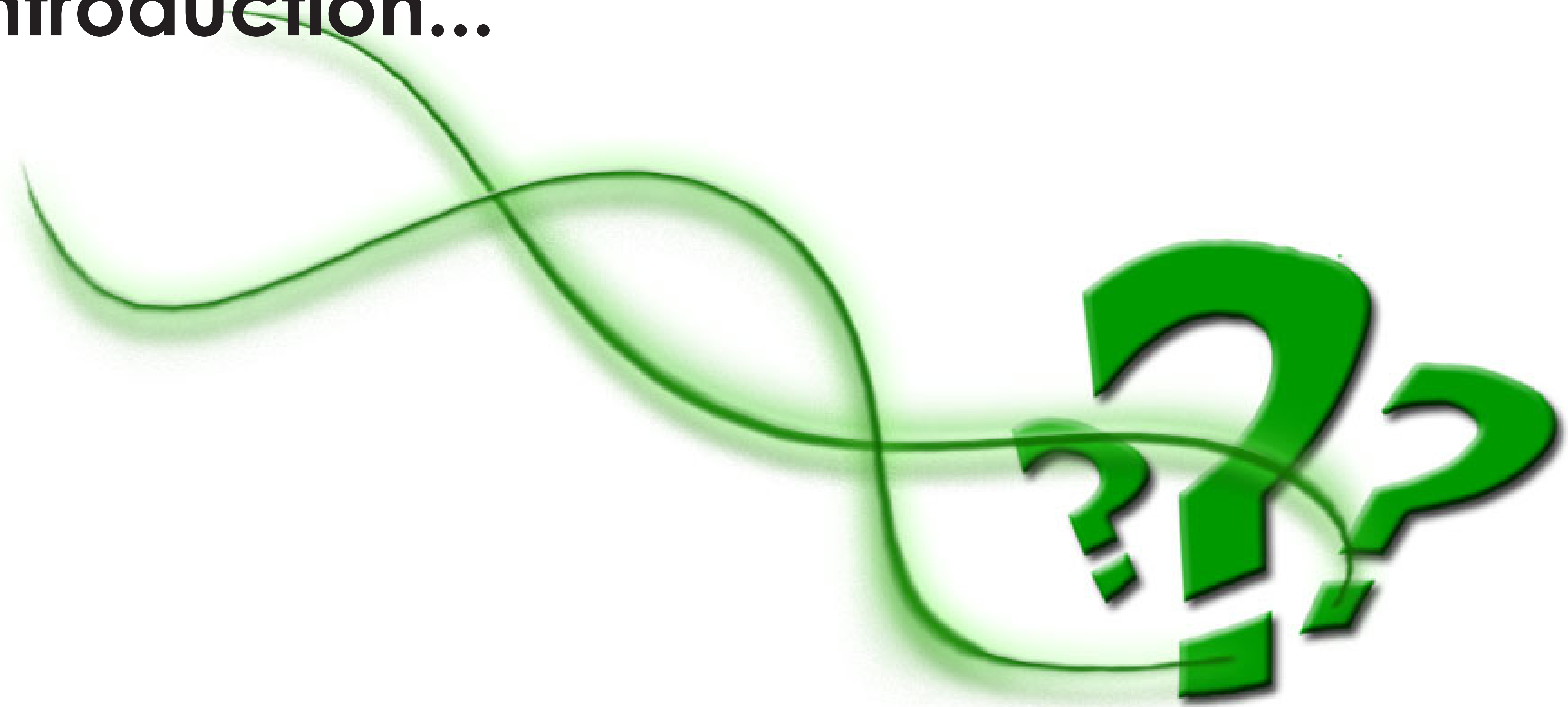
Back to table of contents

Introduction...



Introduction

The problem

When a company calls for learning proposals from adult education institutions, it is all too common that it finds that what is being being offered does not address the real learning needs of the company or is not in sync with the company's strategies and culture. Instead, all too often, company officials feel that providers offer ready-made, "off-the-shelf" courses which only partially address the company's needs.

Consequently we have heard from various learning providers that their staff members lack the competencies to customise learning processes to suit corporate clients' needs. Providers of education - be it life-long-learning centres, universities or technical colleges - have confirmed to the creators of this handbook that their corporate clients more frequently ask for customised interventions tailored specifically to their company.

In order to meet their corporate clients' requirements, education providers therefore need to train their own personnel to work with their customers to identify real learning needs and to create learning processes which address their needs for change, improvement and adaptation. These learning interventions must be aligned with the company's strategies and culture and address learning needs the staff finds relevant and worthwhile.

Where does this handbook come from?

In 2005 a small group of specialists in Adult Education from five Nordic countries met in Hässleholm, Sweden for a two-day conference. The question on the agenda was: "Is there a need for special Nordic continuing education aimed at Adult Educators?" This group was called together by a **task force** created by **NVL – Nordic Network for Adult Learning**, an initiative supported by the **Nordic Council of Ministers**.

After meeting a few times over 3 years the group of specialists came to the conclusion that a Nordic series of courses for Adult Educators would be beneficial and suggested three pilot projects. This process is described in a report: **Innovative læreprocesser i praksis et udviklingsforløb**, published in September 2009. The present handbook is the final product one of these pilots: a course on needs assessment held in Iceland by the University of Iceland for 25 adult educators from 5 Nordic countries.

The course itself was the result of extensive needs assessment in companies and learning providers in three Nordic countries. What you see in this handbook is what we learned through the process. The course and this handbook were made possible with a grant from **NordPlus Adult**, through the collaboration of Tietgen Skolen in Odense, Denmark, Folkeuniversitetet Oslo, Norway, and The University of Iceland, Reykjavik.

What can this handbook do for you

This HandBook should be seen as a rough guide in new terrain: A tool for adult educators trying on new roles and experimenting with new tasks. Our aim is to inspire you to approach your clients in a way that allows you to understand them, work fruitfully with them and find new ways to offer them your expertise.

Adult educators know their subject AND they know how to help people learn that subject and increase their competencies; many roles, methods and tools used in this context are already part of the educator's toolkit, but now they are used in a new context. It was a very positive experience to see participants in our pilot course coming back from practical work with real companies excited that knowledge and skills they deemed mundane, knowledge they had about learning and development, was totally new to their clients. Adult educators have accumulated knowledge and skills through their work as educators that is needed in today's corporate world and should not be taken for granted.

This HandBook should be a practical and inspirational tool for adult educators, consultants and learning designers who are charged with meeting learning needs in companies and organisations. We hope to give you some background ideas about the process of needs assessment, which is the first but vital step in the process of designing learning interventions. We talk about learning interventions or processes rather than courses, teaching or training, because your result might be to design an e-learning course, suggest job switching, coaching, self directed learning, launching a company Wiki or even maybe a classroom course. All of these are different types of "interventions" aimed at building the capacity and competency of your client's staff.

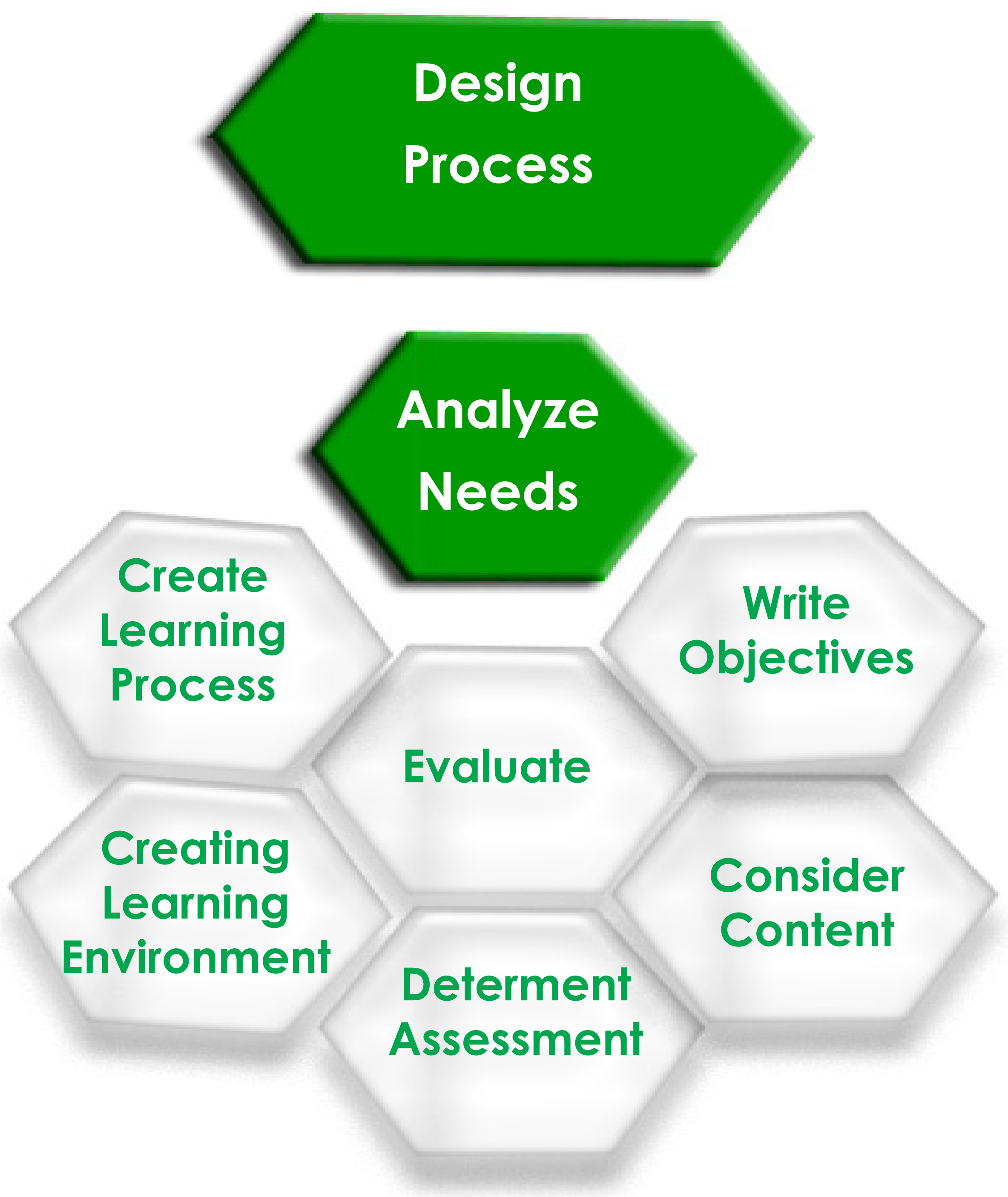
This is not the place to go into depth about Human Performance Improvement, Needs Analysis or Instructional Design. Here we aim to give concise advice, to suggest important questions to consider when taking on a new task like the one described in this HandBook, and to provide some possible answers. We focus on the first step in designing learning processes. We hope this material will inspire you, give you good questions, stimulate reflection and equip you with some tools as you embark on a new journey. You should also find numerous pointers to more learning material so you can dive as deep as you desire.

Overview of Content

Adult educators have the task of designing learning processes for other people. Usually the first task is to decide who needs to learn what. Sure enough, sometimes we step into the process at various stages, but at least conceptually learning needs analysis is the first step to take.

Usually this is a straightforward step: John wants to be able to drive a car; thus he needs to learn how to drive. In a corporate situation this step can be somewhat more elaborate. The scope of this HandBook covers this first step in the design of learning processes.

One possible model of a design process. This handbook concentrates on the first step: Needs assessment.



Back to table of contents

The teacher as...

When you meet new challenges, new projects or tasks, it can be very useful to clarify your own perception of yourself, to clarify for yourself who you are and what your role and mission are. In this chapter we will give you some ideas and questions to help with this clarification so that you stand on secure ground when you meet your client.

Your meeting with the client

In the second part of the HandBook we will offer some useful attitudes, ideas and tools which can help you increase your communication skills.

[Training] Needs Analysis

This main section deals with the task of assessing and analysing people's performance at work, and determining what they can do to align themselves with the strategies, goals and needs of their company. We will study various aspects of needs analysis, as well as present some useful methods and tools to use for your needs assessment. The word Training is in parentheses to stress the point that sometimes your suggestions may not include any training at all.

Back to table of contents

Creating and communicating

Finally a short glimpse into what follows, some ideas for analysing and interpreting your data in order to be able to recommend learning interventions for company representatives.

Toolbox

At the back of the HandBook we have gathered together some tools we have found useful in working with clients in the processes we describe here.

A new role:
The teacher/trainer as Designer

Teacher / Trainer as Designer

- The traditional teacher's self-image is challenged when a company (or an organisation) approaches an adult training institution for assistance with creating focused and strategic development of its workers' competencies.

- From thinking in subjects, syllabuses and time-tested training programmes, the educator is forced to change perspectives in order to address the strategic need for new or developed competencies in the company. Through a reflective transformation process the designer of learning processes is exposed to a variety of vocational as well as ethical challenges.

- In this chapter we will try to draw up the contours of the competent learning designer who is able to enter into a qualified and professional dialogue with company representatives about its needs for competence growth.

New Roles

Astrid has been teaching English at an evening school for 10 years. She has held beginners classes, as well as advanced classes for specific target groups, conversation techniques for business people, technical language for specialists participating in international cooperation. Usually she has received the course design from her employer, or she has designed a course with some colleagues which then has been advertised and offered for several consecutive semesters. During the last two years, however, she has been asked to create special courses for people in specific companies. For example, when a local company acquired an English competitor, the management wanted to increase its staff´s competency in English in order to smoothen the merger. Likewise she has been involved in creating English courses for health workers who have increasingly had to support immigrants and health tourists at a local clinic. Astrid, the English teacher, now suddenly needs to understand her clients' business strategies, determine the staff's levels of competence and find ways to advance the staff's performance in sync with the companies goals.

In order to succeed in this new role, Astrid the English teacher will benefit by redefining her role as an educator.

It can be a complicated task to define what adult educators are or do, so diverse can their field of activity and responsibility be. Even at a recent conference on the professionalization of adult educators, a large group of university teachers who train adult educators found it difficult to agree on a definition of who adult educators are and what they do. However we do have some common images of "traditional" adult educators. One is of a specialist who has been teaching his or her subject(s) at an institution for adult education. In most western countries we have a variety of public and private institutions which offer courses and other learning opportunities to adults. Often these teachers' responsibilities have consisted of teaching courses at various levels in their field of expertise and of participating in the general planning in the institute. According to our information, these people's jobs seem have been undergoing considerable change recently.
This seems to be mainly because of demands from the institute's corporate customers.

New demands

As we have already mentioned, many companies constantly need services from learning providers when they need to increase their staff's competencies in one field or another. A well known boom in this area was in the 1990's when every company desperately needed to update its staff´s computer skills. External training institutions sold computer courses by the hundreds - usually standard courses: "Word Processing 1, 2 and 3", "Spread Sheet beginners and advanced levels" etc. Since then HRD manager's dissatisfaction with this kind of service has been growing, resulting in more and more companies demanding tailor-made courses which suit the company.

The teacher as a learning designer

It is an understandable reaction from learning providers to want to involve their teachers in meeting new demands from their clients. It is the teachers who know the content and who are experts in helping people learn.

But for some, designing a course built on a need for specific competencies and skills, and not on "the logic of the subject" can seem to be a new approach to teaching. In addition, working in "the field" to establish educational needs and design ways for people to learn and acquire new competencies which fit the context of a company they themselves do not know very well may seem strange.

Traditional roles vs. new

Because many are used to the traditional classroom setting in adult education institutions, it can even be hard to accept that learning can take place without the teacher playing a central role in the learning process, as the learner captures knowledge and achieves competence.

However taking on a new role, including one which fits such contexts and situations, can also be a rewarding experience.

Case: An educators **Two different approaches of the educator...**

An organisation approaches your training institution seeking your services to increase the training competencies of their staff.

Task: - As a learning designer, how will you tackle the first consultation with the organisation?

To inspire you, a list of questions can illustrate different perspectives a traditional teacher would take compared to that of one who approaches the task as a learning designer.

The learning designers questions to his client:

Does the organisation have the employees that can follow the company's strategies and reach its goals?

- today and
- In five years time?

Does your company need people with new competencies?

And would acquiring these competencies involve recruiting new people?

Or would it involve helping present staff acquiring these competencies?

How can you as an organisation help your staff acquire the desired competencies?

The teachers questions to his client:

What are the learning objectives of your organisation?

How will the employees be motivated to participate in the training?

What can you tell me about the educational environment?

Are there people within your organisation who can take part in the training as resource people?

Jack of all trades?

We have established that adult educators are traditionally used to taking on various roles, so the new role of learning designer can be just another new role. One of these new roles is to be a catalyst for capacity building.

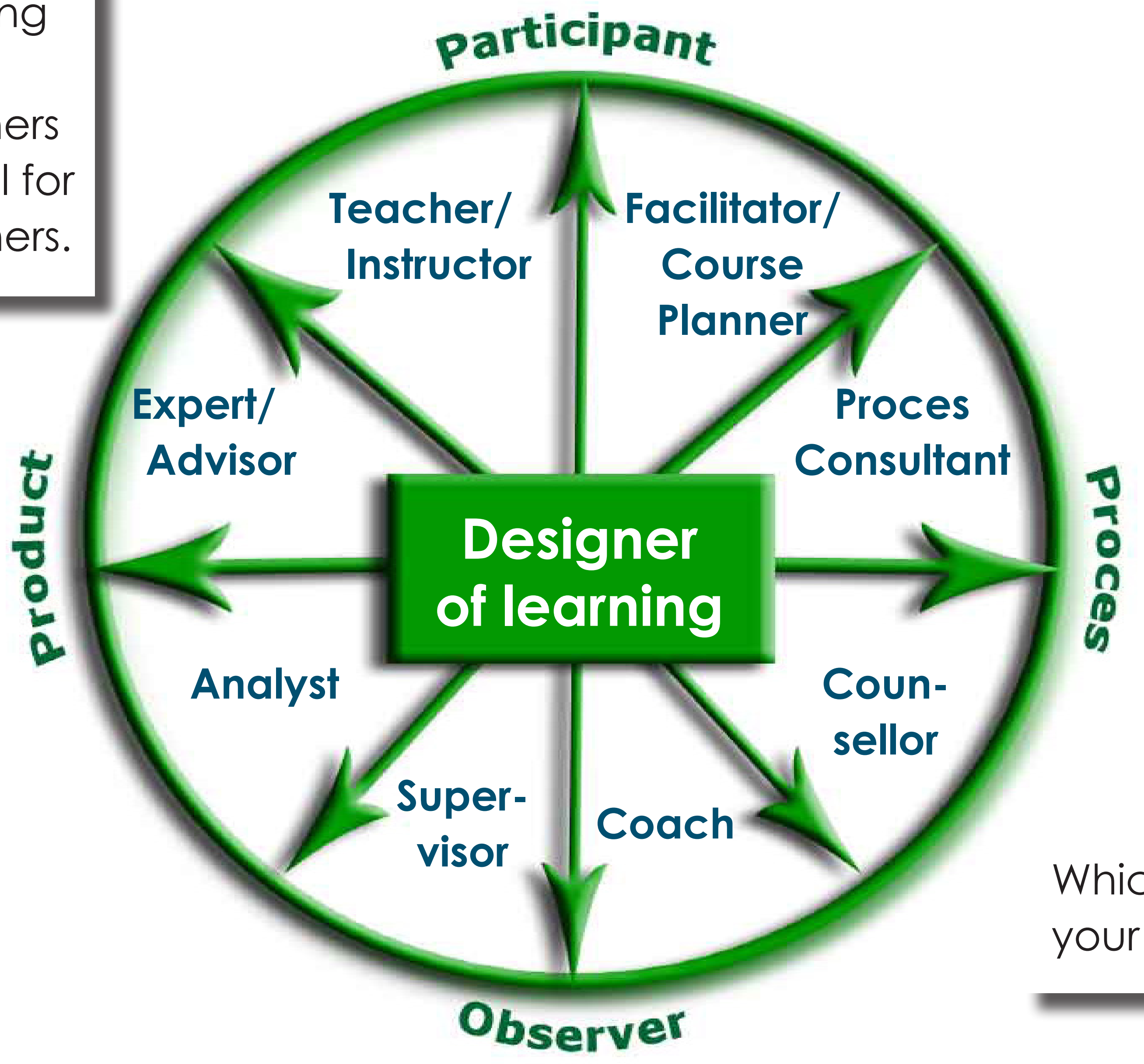
Catalyst for capacity building

In order to fulfil the role of a catalyst for capacity building in the company, the designer of learning processes will need to understand the company's strategic plans as well as sufficient knowledge of competencies already present among the staff. A so-called "gap analysis" will then expose discrepancies between present competencies and desired competencies. The role of the learning designer is then to propose and create customised learning processes aimed at bridging the gap in competencies.

Adult educator roles

Adult educators routinely play various roles in their daily endeavours of helping adults learn. They need to be motivators, learning facilitators, good explainers etc. Changing situations in society call for new roles among educators as for others.

The Educator as...
Designer of learning processes



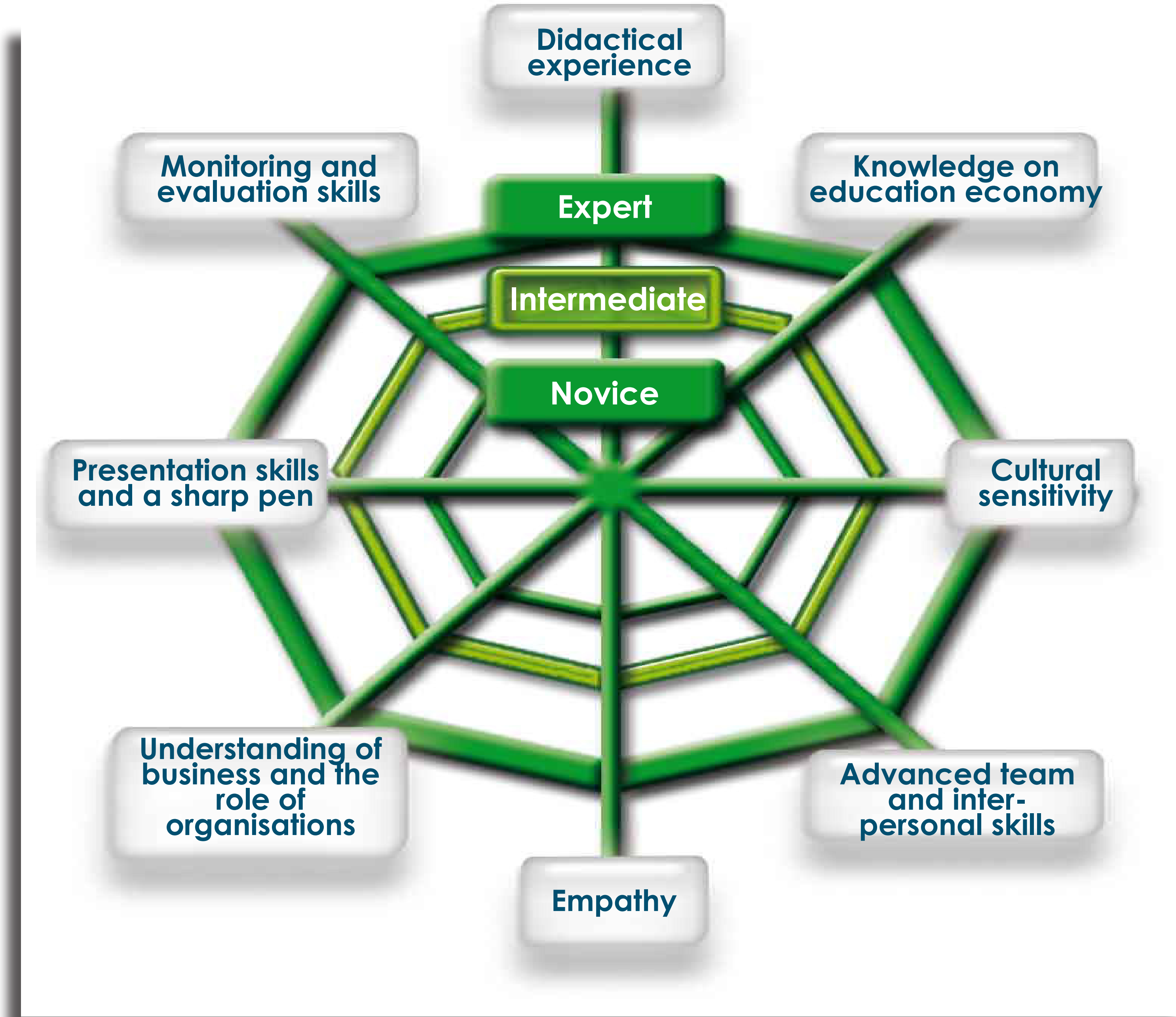
Which of these roles do you play in your job as an adult educator?

Due to a division of duties in some training institutions, learning designers may not be involved in teaching activities at all. They may concentrate on consultations with the institution's corporate clients.

Other learning designers are 'Jacks of all trades' in the sense that they are competent and capable of identifying training needs in a company, designing relevant training efforts, taking part in training as a facilitator or educator, and finally evaluating the long-term effects of the training.

Still others who are experts in teaching a specific subject are called on to play an active role in tailoring new learning interventions for a specific client because of their deep knowledge of a subject. Whatever your present role, it is more likely than not that you will increasingly find yourself in the situation where you regularly need to tailor-make learning interventions for a group of learners. And this role calls for its own set of skills and competencies.

Which ones do you think you should develop further?



It may surprise the reader, that we deliberately excluded 'teaching excellence' as a core competence for the learning designer. However it is our belief that teaching experiences will influence the depth of each of the eight above-mentioned core competencies.

By writing an X on each of the 8 axes at the level of competence you judge yourself to be, and drawing a line between the X-s you can create a profile of your own current competencies in this field; you could even add another marker in another colour with your desired level of competence. This could help you to read this book and other material on needs assessment with a more focused mind.

Whom do you serve - and how?

Let us look at our scenario once again, this time from a different perspective: the perspective of locality and professional ethics. Let us imagine a training institution is approached by a company in which the training need has already been defined: - “We need some general courses in business English for our sales personnel”. Such a request is typically met by offering a standard off-the-shelf course: A straight forward purchase-sale relationship.

We claim however that training institutions are increasingly requested to use their expertise to design tailor-made learning processes that are capable of developing strategic competencies demanded by the specific company, in a specific situation with its own culture:

“What kind of training would you recommend for our sales personnel in order to meet our strategy in the British market? “

In this case the training institution takes on an advisory role where its performance differs considerably from the traditional role of selling courses. The training institution has suddenly entered into the field of selling consultancy services.
With this new role in mind, we can easily envision various self-images an adult educator might have in relation to offering consultancies to companies.

One way of thinking about various roles is to set them up in a square:

Self Reflection On...

The Educator

Delivering the training based on needs assessments performed by others

Salary paid by employer/Training institution

Other Characteristica?

The Independent (???) Consultant

Serves as catalyst for the company... In order for them to handle their own competence creation

Charges the company according to time used

Other Characteristica?

Personal/group Mission

The Educational salesperson

Consults the company in order to bring back training orders to own educational institution

No charges for the consultations. Prise build into contracts on training delivery

Other Characteristica?

The Advisor on Educational planning

Assigned to draw up proposals for learning interventions

Charges the company a fixed remuneration

Other Characteristica?

In this particular example, where the company intends to expand its market share in Britain, you can imagine two different approaches on the part of the training institution that wants to meet the company's request:

Either you can offer your participation in needs analyses and learning design for the company based on a charge for your consultation, e.g. per hour, or you can do the consulting free of charge, anticipating that your costs will be covered through overheads when the company later on buys suggested courses from your training institution.

- **How do you see – and wish to see – yourself?**
- **How does your institution want to address new roles like these?**
- **What role fits your current institutional culture?**

Ethical Dilemmas

We hope that the two mentioned approaches expose some of the ethical dilemmas related to the more complex relationship between company and training institution that is built into offering consultancies and training from the same actor:

- Will the learning designer be able to act in an unbiased manner if he / she is paid commission based on the number of courses brought home to the training institution?

- Is it likely that the learning designer will recommend training performed by a competitor of his / her training institution?

- And do you believe that, to meet the needs for competencies in the company, the training designer will recommend such interventions as internal job-rotations, use of internal instructors, or other solutions that do not involve external training from his / her training institution?

Summary

Progressive training institutions have tackled these ethical dilemmas in various ways. Some have developed internal policies for remuneration which do not clash with the vision of offering impartial consultancies for companies. Others have separated their consultancy division from their training division. And again others have openly announced their bias, thereby admitting that their consultancy is not objective.

Meeting with the client...

- Your first meeting with company representatives is crucial in at least a double sense: - on the one hand your client will assess you, your cultural sensitivity, and the confidence you convey in being to deliver the required consultancies ...... on the other hand the initial meeting offers you an opportunity to influence the agenda and frame for the educational task the company faces.

- Equipped with knowledge of the company and it strategies, strong communicative competences, cultural sensitivity, and a toolbox of learning methods the learning designer will be well armed to meet the client's needs.

- In this chapter we will address some relevant considerations the learning designer would be wise to consider in his / her preparations for the first meeting with company representatives.

A many faceted encounter

A cultural meeting takes place each time company representatives meet with the learning designer (representing a training provider or acting as an independent consultant). At each meeting you as the learning designer will be assessed and your competence to help the company fulfil their objectives appraised.

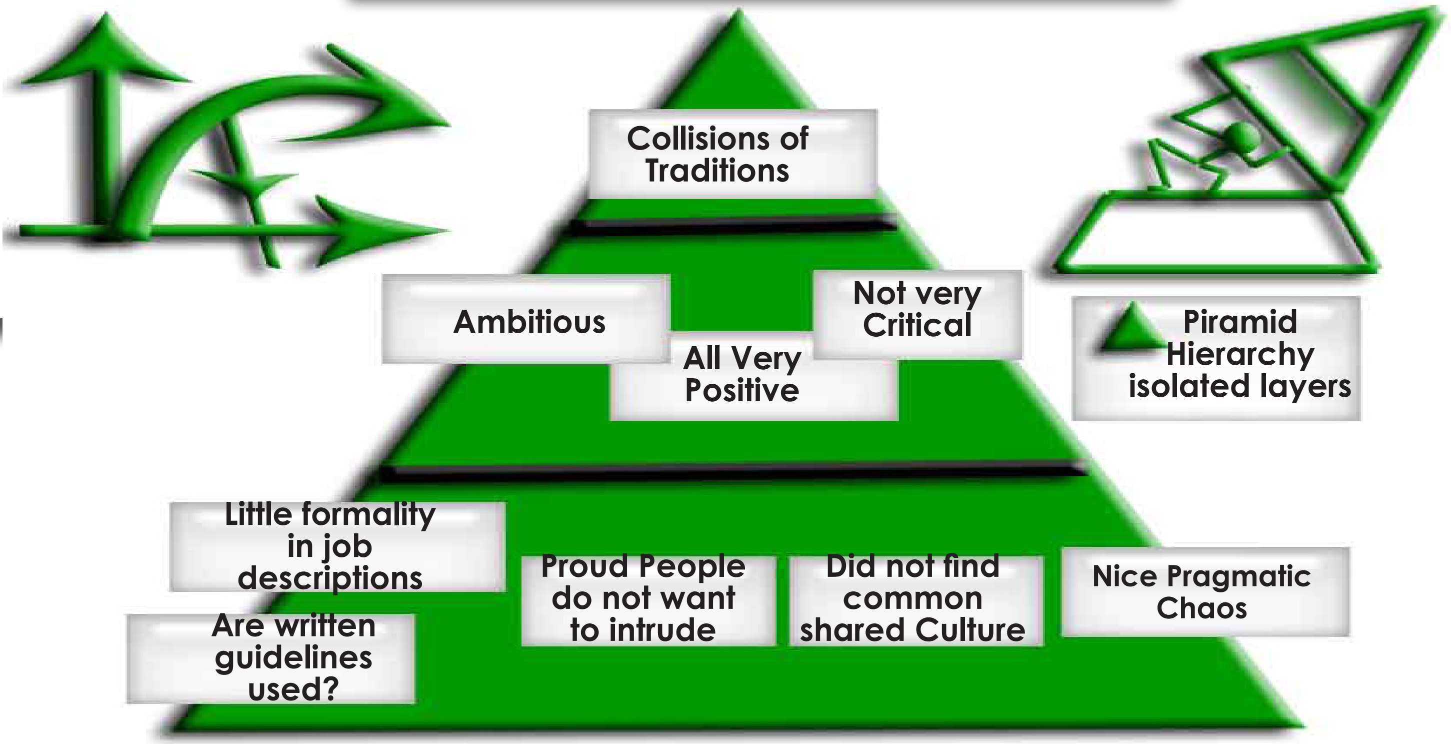
Right from the first meeting with the client, you will have to convincingly balance the task of scanning the company culture with the task of formulating ideas / methods / likely solutions / relevant approaches to the educational assignment.

Perceiving the cultural aspects of importance to the company requires cultural sensitivity. This sensitivity can be the prerequisite for observing and uncovering the reasons for problems in performance, or finding ways to help people change their behaviour and develop new competencies.

When you work with your client, make a mental note of various aspects of the company culture.

The white labels on the pyramid are some cultural observations participants at a course on Need Assessment made during a field trip to variuos companies.

Cultural Observations



- Visual impressions...
- Language Codes...
- Power Structure...
- Alignment / Fractions...
- Traditions Towards use of Learning methods...

...........Other Cultural OBS?

In order to cope with the demanding task of simultaneously observing, actively listening, and contributing efficiently to the dialogue, the learning designer will benefit from thoroughly prepared to each meeting with the clients: you might examine the company webs in order to acquire insight into their organisational set-up, their power structure, their objectives and strategies, and with some insight you might even distinguish some of the language codes used in the company.

A competent learning designer has developed his / her personal style for how to handle each unique meeting with a client:

Your personal style:

1. **Do you to imply possible solutions in order to have them commented on straight away by the client ...... or do you refrain from presenting possible solutions until you present your ideas systematically?**

2. **Do you focus entirely on major issues and a frame for the cooperation (or partnership) with the company ...... or exercise the freedom to dive into brainstorming with the client in order to identify possible ways of tackling the educational challenges of the company?**

3. **Do you handle the consultations on your own ...... or do you secure support from a colleague with supplementary competencies to yours?**

4. **Do you insist that the learning activities be anchored strategically in the power structure of the company ...... or leave it to the company to decide links between itself and the consultant (as well as potential training providers)?**

5. **Do you announce your terms of payment ...... or wait and indicate a rate in a written offer that will describe the assignment and the frame for how to gain the desired competencies?**

To summarize, the multi faceted encounter with the client at the first meeting – and at all later meetings with company representatives – the learning designer will benefit from a strategic plan made in advance of each meeting, cultural sensitivity in order to observe elements of culture which will support or hinder any advance in competence

Ethical questions in dealing with your client

Often a company identifies 'soft' as well as 'hard' competences to be increased. Occasionally a company will call for the help of a training provider because management feels a need to change the behaviour of a group of employees.
This type of consultancy gives rise to a wide spectre of ethical considerations for the learning designer:

1. Is the management aiming for an understandable and justifiable change of attitude and behaviour?

2. Is the learning designer / the consultant taken hostage and used as a tool for the management in order to fulfil their secret agenda?

3. How will the identified group of employees be involved in identification of training needs and design of training activities in order to secure motivated participation?

4. Will management need their own learning processes in order to support a change of attitude and behaviour among the employees?

5. How will likely conflicts between management and the target employees be mediated – and on which terms shall the learning designer offer his assistance as a mediator to the conflicting parties?

As a specific branch of ethical considerations, the learning designer will have to deal with the aspect of 'personal sympathy'. Does your personal integrity collide with that of your client? Are there any hidden agendas in part of the assignment? If so, are they consistent with the consultant's and the training institution's ethical standards?

The following moral contract or "morality check list" can be useful for the learning designer to lean on: It can be used as part of an agreement between the consultant and the corporate client.

Draft code of conduct for the process of learning design and implementation of interventions:

- **All parties affected by learning activities should be involved and have ways to influence planning and implementation of learning activities**
- **All parties – or individuals – involved in competence building have executive power to call for a "time-out", if he / she feels manipulated or personally confronted in any way by the learning activities**
- **Doubts and resistance are gifts that will be utilized in order to enrich the learning outcomes**
- **Individuals daring to confront taboos in the company will be given open recognition for their courage and bravery**
- **Fair play, the right to be heard, and involvement of affected parties will be secured in all learning activities in the company**
- **Learning designers will always have the executive power to terminate a contract (or a partnership) with a client if the code of conduct is violated.**

Communication tools

In dialogue with the company, the learning designer will need to employ a diverse range of communicative methods and tools, each of which should only be applied in appropriate situations.

By practicing a variety of communicative methods in the dialogue with the company, the learning designer sets an example, modelling communicative methods which would also be used during the learning activities.

Communication tools
(an incomprehensive selection)

- Active listening
- Your Four Ears
- Visual facilitation
- Time out / change of perspectives
- Supervision among colleagues
- Moderations method
- Café seminar
- Future workshop
- Reflecting Teams
- Brain storming
- Back Casting
- Open Space Technology
- The 6 different think-hats
- Structured Dialogue
- Mind maps
- Post It notes

For detailed explanations of some of these communication methods and tools see the **Tool box** at the end of the HandBook.

[Training] Need Assessment

If you don't know where you are going....
you will probably end up somewhere else!

Most learning professionals have countless examples of companies which have tried to solve performance problems by forcing their employees to take a course which turned out to be irrelevant to the problem, or offered an approach which did not fit the company or the learners' situation.

Likewise company officials could tell stories of learning-providers who offered and held courses on a subject of importance to the company but which contained examples and exercises not relevant to the company's needs and thus had little impact.

All companies and institutions constantly need to adapt to changing times, new tasks or evolving technologies.
Companies regularly run into times when people experience a discrepancy between the company's goals and tasks and the competence of its staff. At moments when management experiences a need for an increase in competence or adaptation of competencies to new situations they often look to "learning providers" for help.

Most companies today have highly specialized staff in the majority of their posts, people who often know their job much better than their managers do. And although you can find jobs with similar names or similar job-descriptions in many other companies, similarities usually end there. Each company has its own array of products, services, procedures and its very own culture.

Thus many companies expect – and need – training programmes which are tailor-made to their needs. Moreover the managers are not necessarily the people who know best what competencies need to be developed. It is more often than not the case that employees themselves have the clearest ideas about the areas in which they need to develop.

You as an adult educator will have well founded competence in your own subject area, as well as expertise in how people learn and how to help people learn. Your client expects you to identify what needs to be done in order to help their employees to change their behaviour or attitudes. It is important for you to be secure in your own expertise, in learning and in the art and science of helping people learn – that is why you are specially qualified for this task.

Definition

Training needs assessment is a systematic process, using formal or non-formal tools, for gathering data which can be used to devise ways to improve human performance in a specific context. Training Needs Assessment aims at gathering and interpreting data which will help management and learning-providers to design relevant interventions to solve performance issues. The task is to understand the company's strategic goals, find discrepancies in performance, and establish what needs to be done in order to eliminate the performance issues.

(For other definitions see for example: (Rossett, 1989))


Training Need Assessment
Interpret Results
Write Objectives
Suggest ways to obtain objectives
Design Interventions
Fundamental Idears
Difference (Gather data)
Present
Future
Find Gaps
Optimal
Current
Suggest
Ways
Interventions
Training
How to choose Methods
Possible participation
Time
Reliability
Cost
Approaches
Strategic
Competency
Job description
Training needs
Information
Exterior factors
Internal Data
Participants
Tools
Individuals
Job obervation
Interviews
Survey
Skill assessment
Data
Map company information
Compelency dictionary
Process mapping
Taxonomies
Groups
Group Mind Map
Point Questions
Card Questions
Consultantgroup

Your work could uncover indications that the “problem” can be solved with simple physical means (tools), procedural changes (new ways of doing things) or by improving communication between workers or departments. However learning or unlearning might also be needed.
It is important for the success of your own firm, as well for your professionalism, that your client can trust your integrity and doesn’t have to question whether your main purpose is just to sell courses or teaching hours.

In this chapter we will thus dig into some details about your tasks as an educator who is called on by a company to assist address issues of performance and competence.

There are various ways of approaching a needs assessment.

Approaches

Your services could be called for at different levels and to tackle very different issues where you address competencies, performance and the company's achievements from various angles or aspects. For example, it might be that your client wishes to change the culture in a store, and thus change the behaviour of the sales staff. Or you might be called upon when a company wants to totally reorganize its induction training. Your client might want to create a new training strategy in line with the company's business strategy.

In the literature on performance improvement and needs assessment, these tasks have been addressed in various ways. Kavita Gupta summarized four common approaches in a thoughtful and practical way (Gupta 1999). We will use her division which depicts four approaches ranging from a broad strategic approach for addressing general needs to a narrower training needs assessment which can be used to assess learning needs for a specific upcoming course.

Basic premises

The ultimate aim of training is to improve a company's performance. When managers want to influence or change performance or business results they often look to training as a way to change their employees' behaviour. Needs Assessment is thus a way to gather data in order to make informed decisions on who to train, what to train and how.

In the literature on training and performance improvement, there are many models and approaches to this endeavour. It is not the premise of this HandBook to discuss and compare these approaches in any depth. We will however present some fundamental ideas and methods which can help the practitioner forward.

In the Nordic countries many have been interested in increasing competencies: "Kompetanselöft" has become a slogan over the last few years.

The dominant idea behind needs assessment is to gather and analyse data on the company's and employees' performance in order to find "gaps" which can be "filled" in order to improve performance. These gaps can be found in various areas: They can be due to environmental factors which should support but hinder specific behaviour; company culture might deter an employee from behaving in a desirable way. Insufficient information or inadequate access to information could delay an employee's optimal performance. Gaps in performance can be caused by deficiencies in, or lack of, instruments, tools and other resources employees need to accomplish their tasks. Gaps or problems can also be based on a lack of skill or knowledge: the employees are not skilful or knowledgeable enough to perform optimally. However, they might also be misplaced, not "the right person for the job", or not motivated to perform optimally. To dive deeper into this line of thought read for example Carl Binder's **Six Boxes Model of Behaviour** influences (Binder, 1998).

The basic idea is thus to gather relevant data in order to create a theory on why people do not perform as well as they aspire to. With this in mind you can choose to approach your task from different vantage-points; The Strategic viewpoint gives you a birds-eye view of the company and its performance. Three other approaches give you an incrementally narrower point of view:

Strategic Needs Assessment

Your client might want to align performance with company strategies. With a reactive approach you would help your client identify problems, compare them with the company goals and find ways to improve. A proactive approach would be to use the company business strategy to foresee learning or training needs, and plan interventions based on them. With this strategic approach you start with a broad perspective and gradually zoom in on processes and individual jobs as the need arises. This approach tends to be rather rigorous and time consuming.

Competency Based Needs Assessment

Competency is a popular keyword in the world of education and training although the use of the term may often seem rather vague. However Thomas Gilbert, an American scholar who has written extensively on human competence, was rather ambitious when he defined competence as a "function of worthy performance, which is a function of the ratio of valuable accomplishments to costly behaviour" (Gilbert, 2007) p. 18). Tina M. Teodorescu and Carl Binder continue and define competence as "behaviour producing accomplishments that generate more value than they cost the company to produce. In short, ... [they] define competence as achievement of results that contribute to business goals." (**(Teodorescu & Binder, 2004) p. 8**) With this definition, it follows that if results are lacking, a useful place to look for solutions is in the staff's competencies. Needs assessment should help you identify new competencies needed, or which competencies need to be developed further.

Many companies and institutions like to define what competencies they need in different areas and levels of their operations. These definitions can help them hire the right people and guide their training. Competency based needs assessment is used to identify and specify knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to business goals.

Tools used for this approach are often **competency dictionaries** and **competency models** which are built on them.

Job and Task Analysis

An even narrower approach is Job and Task Analysis. With this approach you map and describe tasks and responsibilities needed to perform a specific job in the institution. You might want to do this for example when a company wants to install specific training requirements for jobs or create standardized training programs for specific groups of workers. Companies sometimes use this approach when creating a Human Resource development database which it later plans to use for strategic training purposes.

Useful tools are job observations, **interviews**, and analysis of job descriptions.

Training Needs Assessment

The Training Needs Assessment approach is used when assessing learning needs for a specific group of learners. Here your activities are more focused than in the approaches above: you will usually focus on specific skills required of the workers, and not their whole job descriptions. This approach is commonly use when a company launches new computer systems or other technologies or procedures.

By assessing the potential learners' training needs you can better align a training program to their needs, and also help develop an implementation plan for the training in order to support the transfer of learning.

Summary

These four approaches each offer their own way of looking at the field of needs analysis. Many more models and approaches exist. We now need to consider concrete methods which can be useful for the task of gathering useful data.

Gathering Data

There are many ways to gather data for your needs assessment. Basically most methods used originate in the social sciences. The choice depends on various factors only you can determine on site. The questions you need to answer determines which methods and tools you use.

Useful information which can help you design learning interventions for your client can be gathered in various places, and in some cases the data has already been collected:

- Annual reports
- Budget
- Statistical data pertinent to the problem/activity in question
- Employee data (Some companies have extensive information on their staff)
- Business results
- Employees themselves
- Management
- Clients

You need to determine which data you need for your needs assessment and come to an agreement with your client how you can approach this data.

Models for data collection in groups

When working with groups you will want to use methods which help you maximize the positive aspects of working with groups, and minimize the negative ones. Here are a few such approaches, each of them has its own set of attitudes, roles and methods which help you conduct fruitful meetings with groups.

Moderations Method

This approach to teamwork was introduced in Germany in the early seventies by a group of consultants who wanted to "involve those who are touched" by changes or interventions. This is a method to help groups work together at various levels. The whole process is visualized on pin boards and the group is activated in such a way that all participants' views are acknowledged.

Tools for this method are pin-boards, pins, and cards - c.a. 10 cm x 20 cm. Participants write their responses to questions from the "moderator" / facilitator on the cards, as well as any annotations they have to the discussion. The cards on the table constitute the written record of the group's discussion.

Two of the most recognized methods used are **Point Questions**, and **Card Questions**, described in the Tool box.

Schrader, K., & Klebert, E. S. (2000). Winning Group Results (p. 162). Windmühle.

Neuland, M. (1998). The World of Moderation. Managerseminare Verlag.

Metaplan. (n.d.). **Metaplan® Basic Techniques, Moderating group discussions using the Metaplan approach.**

And more on our **online bookmark list**

Post-It method

The Post-It method could be considered to be related to the Moderation Method. But instead of using cardboard cards you use Post-It™ Meeting & Brainstorming Notes. Participants write their ideas and answers on Post-it notes which they or the facilitator stick on a wall or an easel. The success of this method and the Moderation Method lies in the visualisation of the results and the active involvement of the participants, who get to put their ideas on the wall. This method allows a group to focus on the ideas discussed and not on who had the idea.

For a thorough description of the method and many useful questions and forms to arrange information see: Straker, D. (1997). **Rapid Problem Solving with Post-It Notes. Da Capo Press.**

Visual Facilitation

Visual facilitation takes the idea of working "visually" with a group one step further. When a facilitator uses this method he/she is registers on a very large paper wall agendas, discussions, results, to-do lists, etc. while the participants discuss. The end result is usually a very optically pleasing visual representation of the meeting and its results.

Humans are very visual in their thinking and experience of the world, both around them and within. By visualizing their thoughts a facilitator can help his clients develop their ideas and better grasp the abstract ideas they are discussing.

Sometimes visual facilitators work with another facilitator in order to be able to concentrate on visualizing the discussions. However you can benefit from these methods also when you work alone by using various graphical forms to organize information and help groups structure their thinking.

For more information: **Kommunikationslotsen** and **mediate.com**

Other Models

This is by no means a comprehensive list, think of it more as a teaser. Other well known methods for group facilitation are:

The Delphi Method

Scrum (development)

Theme Centred Interaction

It is well worth your while to master at least one of these methods when you want to work with groups at solving problems or designing the future, such as training needs assessment.

How to choose methods

The first thing to consider is choosing methods in accordance with the data you need. If your task is to find out how to help salespeople in a store to be more outgoing – you definitely want to observe them during their work, maybe even "in-cognito".
If a department is to get new tasks or tools, a focus group discussion with a representative group would be fitting. A useful way to choose tools and methods is to create clear questions you need to answer in order to answer "the big question" you are hired to answer, and then ask yourself: "What tools and methods help me to get answers to these questions?"

How deep should you go?

Academic rigour is very useful when scientists are interested in research for the sake of theory building, and in order to be able to draw conclusions which can be used for explanations or predictions which could have general relevance. Exact scientific methods, however, are in some cases too expensive and manpower-consuming when seeking answers for a small company or for a small project. It is thus vital to be able to adapt tools and methods which fit the task at hand and keep the end in mind.

Possible participation

Choice of methods is limited by the access you have to informants and information. Is it possible to observe the staff at work? How will your observation influence their work? Can you get access to workers for interviews and focus group sessions? The same applies for superiors and other experts who could give useful information. Access to company data and people who can guide you to it or find data you need understandably limits your research.

The time factor

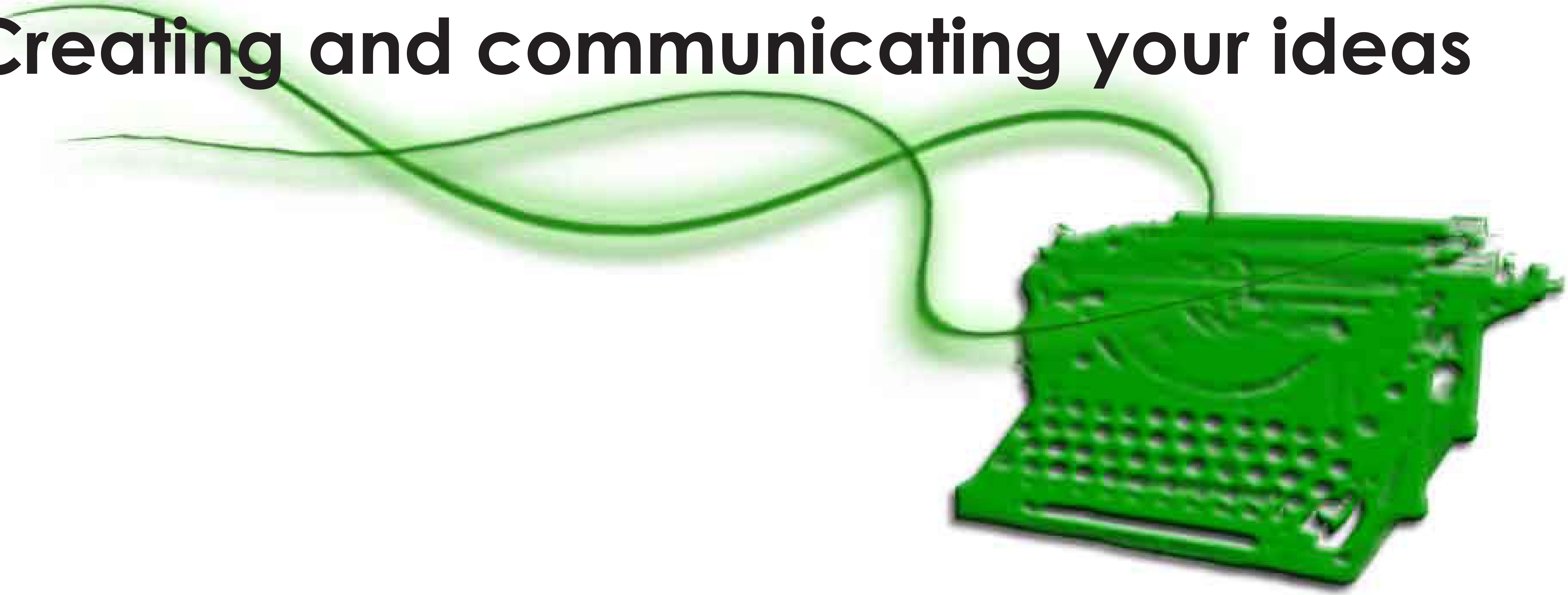
Usually you have a limited amount of time to conduct your findings. This too limits your approach, as well as the tools you use. However, many of the methods mentioned here render themselves to "quick-and-dirty" variations, where you put less stress on rigorously recording everything, and instead record only what you find relevant during your data gathering, such as during interviews and focus group discussions. Some methods – such as the Card Question – function in such a way that a report is created simultaneously and with the group. It is enough to take a photograph of the resulting layout of cards on the pin board.

Reliability

As a general rule, the greater the reliability of your measurements and the data you acquire, the more costly they are in time and money. Your demands for reliability of the data also dictate what tools you use, and how. A survey sent to all employees gives more reliable data, than a few interviews. So the scope of your assessment should be in sync with how many will be influenced by your findings, and how you expect to use the data.

Thus, methods and tools need to be chosen wisely.

Creating and communicating your ideas



- Based on the data collection the Learning Designer is now charged with the challenge to analyse the data in order to develop ideas of how to support the company in its struggle for strategic competences which at present are not available.
- The creative process resulting in a unique blend of learning interventions and maybe other HR-related recommendations are discussed in this chapter, that also will add advises on what to consider for the Learning Designer before he / she presents recommendations to the company.

Having gathered data relevant to your task, your point of view as a guest comes into play. Your expertise as an adult educator and a subject matter expert give you your own point of view which is different from the point of view of most company officials. This point of view helps you spot learning needs and how they might be met in the special context you are working within.

To finish off, here are a few practical pointers which might guide you through the first step in designing learning processes.

Analysing your data

- When you find discrepancies in your data, or have difficulties in understanding specific issues, do not hesitate to refer to experts – in the company or outside – to help you interpret it.

- Always keep your client informed about discrepancies in data, problems, and in which direction your data and analysis is developing. It can be counterproductive to surprise your business partners with new information in your final presentations.

- You could benefit from using various strategic models (SWOT, and 5/6 forces, PEST etc.), but use them critically.

- When analysing data on jobs and competencies, you could benefit from using taxonomies such as Blooms Taxonomy of Learning Domains as well as Job Descriptions, Competency Dictionaries, some of which are produced by social partners or professional associations.

Creating your ideas

- Keep it simple. Detailed planning of learning interventions comes at a later stage after a formal agreement of cooperation is entered into between the company and you as the learning designer.

- If using strategic models (e.g. SWOT) in your presentation of analyses to the company, make an effort to use models which company representatives are familiar with.

- Recommendations based on needs assessments should be realistic and free from 'overkill'. Try to avoid overambitious recommendations that are based on your wishful thinking rather than a realistic assessment of resources and the company's willingness to invest time and funds

- Avoid being overoptimistic in the sense of predicting substantial competence growth based on limited input to learning interventions.

- Although you were hired to uncover learning needs, sometimes your analyses will uncover organisational weaknesses or obstacles which will not be solved with education or training, but with organisational or practical or even technical changes. In such cases you should not restrict yourself solely to learning recommendations but should discuss potential organisational or practical issues.

- Make sure that all parties in the company affected by your recommendations are heard – or will be heard – before you enter a formal agreement to design learning interventions in the company. It is of utmost importance that a strong coalition consisting of all affected parties is established to secure success for the competency creation being initiated.

- Writing concrete learning objectives for specific jobs, roles or performances can help you solidify your ideas.

Communicating your ideas

- Adults need to be convinced of the need to change or to learn something new. Therefore you should make sure that your proposals include convincing analysis and arguments for the competencies you suggest should be developed.

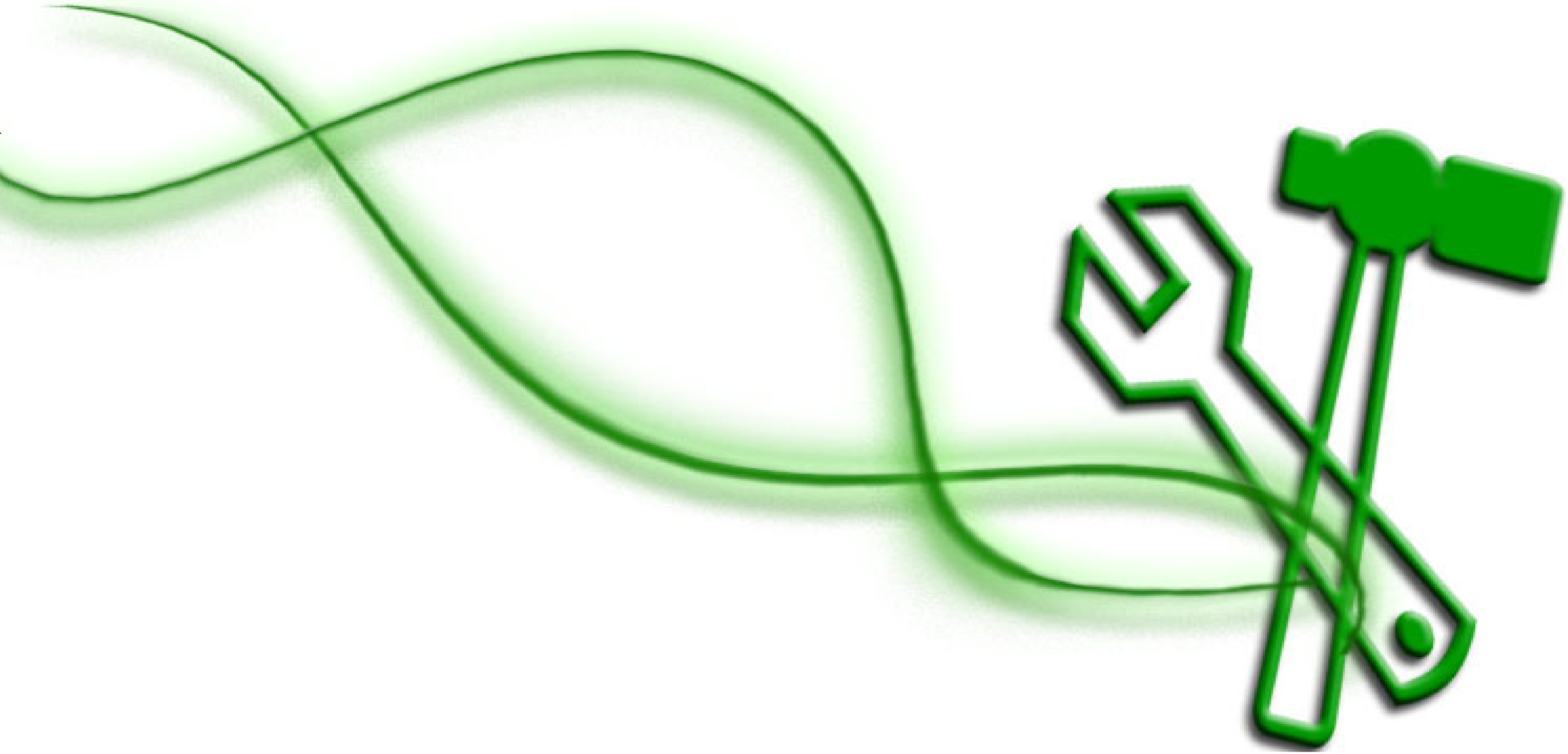
- Keep your analyses and recommendations in a linguistic code that is understandable to the company and its employees. Abstain from trying to impress your business partner by using unnecessary academic or flowery language.

- Spice your presented cocktail (recommendations) with a humble attitude, show respect for the company and its achievements so far, and add a personal flavour in the form of your unique sense of humour.

- Have fun and act as a motivated learner yourself during your dialogues, observations, analyses and interactions with the company.

- Use vivid examples and even photographs from the company in your written and/or visual presentations. This helps people understand and relate to your arguments and also increases interest and attention during your presentations.

Toolbox



Toolbox

In this toolbox you can find various tools which you can use during your needs assessment. Some of these tools are well known to you, others not.

The information given here should be enough to get you started, but to master these techniques you will need to look to other sources. Therefore we have included information for further reading with many of the tools.

The tools are arranged in five groups:

1. Communication tools
2. Visualisation tools
3. Data gathering tools
4. Group and team tools
5. Tools for mapping company information

Communication tools

Active listening

Maybe the most important tool of all for people whose work is based on helping others is active listening.
Active listening can be defined the "the process of attending carefully to what a speaker is saying, involving such techniques as accurately paraphrasing the speaker's remarks" (Wictionary 2010)

If your clients feel you are really listening to what they are saying, it is more likely they will trust you, and it will take you less time to get the information you need.

Tools or methods for active listening include eye contact, paraphrasing what you understand the other is saying. Observing the other person's body language can also be helpful.

Your four ears

Sometimes when you talk to a client you are startled by a snappy answer, or you feel in your stomach that the person you are talking to might really be saying something else than the words she used normally mean.

She might say "...but it is 12 o'clock!" You know instinctively she is not informing you about the time, the real meaning of that utterance is probably "Shouldn't we stop now and go for lunch?" or "...our meeting should have ended half an hour ago... I have to be somewhere else now..."

F. Schutz von Thun, a German expert in communication, addressed this issue in a way which is useful for all who rely on communication professionally. He suggested that all communication has four sides, and that we have four ears - one to receive information from each side of the communication.

4 EARS

How do you distinguish between what is said and wat is meant?

You can use your “4 EARS”, which “hear” four different aspects of the communication. You then have to deteriin which aspect of the communication you want to respond to...

Content ear
“This is the way it is...”

- Here’s how I understand the issue
  - Information
  - Facts
- Evaluation
  - True/Not true
  - Value
  - Satisfactory

Self statement ear
“Now I am someone who...”

- Who is this person?
- What does she/he want?
- How does she/he feel?
- What does this tell me about the other

Appeals ear
“Please (don’t) do this!”

- What should i
  - Feel
  - Do
  - Think

Relationships ear
“This is how our relationship is!”

- Through
  - Choice of words
  - Intonation
  - Expression
- How does he/she talk to me
- What does he/she think of me

(This ear is offen over-sensitive)

When you feel it ”in your stomack” that there is discrepancy between what someon says and is feelings whict follow, try to check which ear is recieving especialy strong signals - which ear is recieving the strongest signals...

Each statement has **factual information** - usually the dominant part of the communication. It can be true or false, relevant or not, and it may be sufficient or it may lack details which need to be added. These three criteria can help you follow up if something is missing or if you sense any discrepancies.

The second side of the communication is a **self statement**. It reveals some aspect of the person speaking: What he/she feels, what he/she stands for.

A **relationship** ear is receptive to communication about what the other thinks about his/her relationship to you. Sometimes people can have especially sensitive relationship ears, which constantly check for information like: What does he think of me? How does she relate to me?

Finally an **appeal** ear is sensitive to the appeals side of a communication. Thus the statement "...but it is 12 o'clock!" could carry the appeal: "Please can we stop now, I have to be somewhere else!"

If you practice distinguishing different sides of a communication, you will be able to read more out of communication. And maybe the most important benefit is that when you feel that there is a conflict between the information side of the communication and some other side, you have a tool to analyse it. The toolbox for dealing with difficult communication (below) can help you find out what is going on, if it is important for you to find out.

For more information on the four sides of communication you might like to read a text from Schutz von **Thun on his model.**

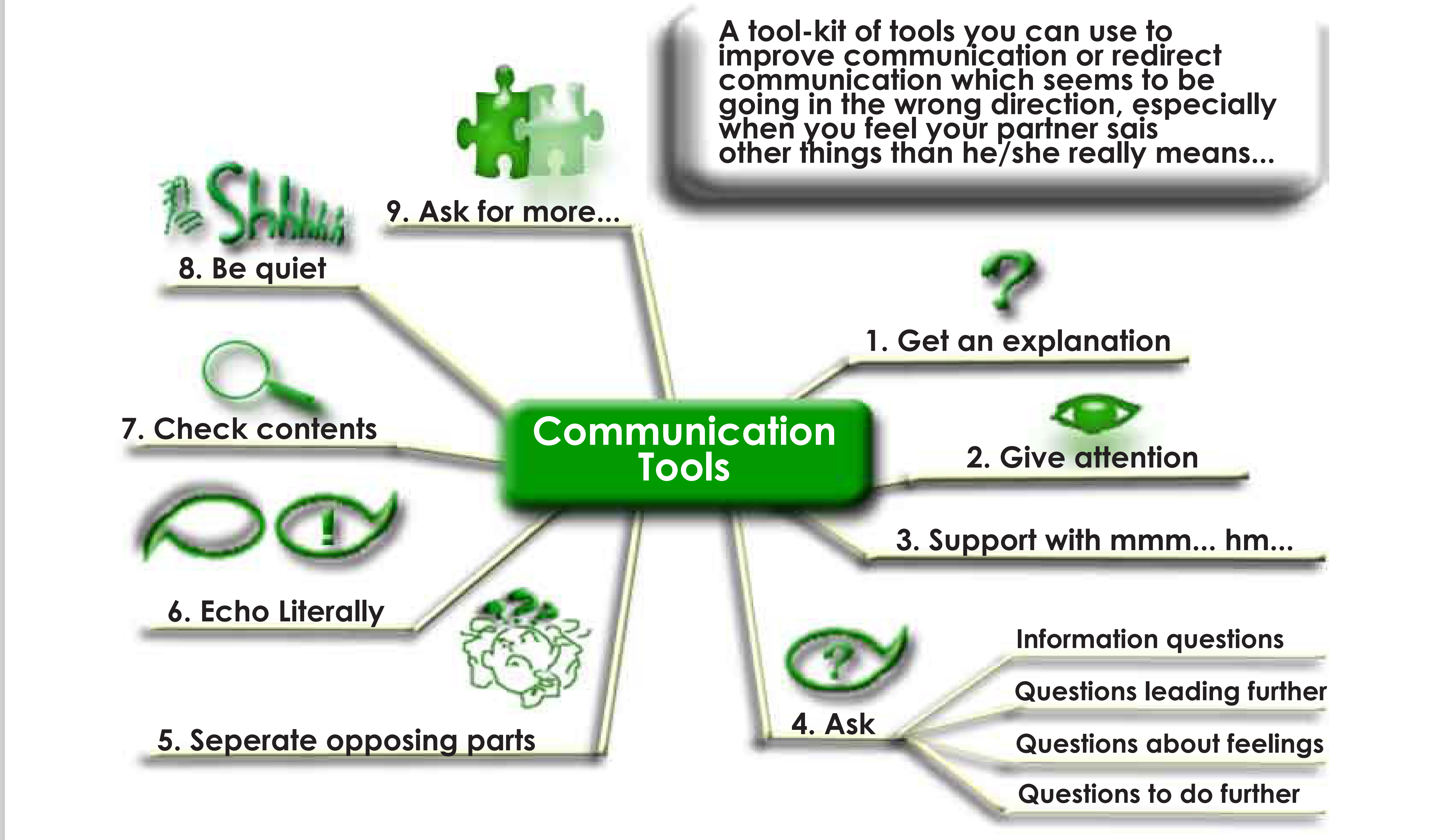
His Book: Friedemann Schulz von Thun, Miteinander Reden, 1981, Rowohlt

A web with a number of self-learn courses in German, and some in English:
http://www.forumzfd-akademie.de/en-af

A toolbox for dealing with difficult communication

So what do you do when you feel that something is going wrong?

With these communication tools you can "wind down" the tension which might be building up and direct the communication in a more constructive direction...



A tool-kit of tools you can use to improve communication or redirect communication which seems to be going in the wrong direction, especially when you feel your partner sais other things than he/she really means...
Communication Tools
1. Get an explanation
2. Give attention
3. Support with mmm... hm...
4. Ask
Information questions
Questions leading further
Questions about feelings
Questions to do further
5. Seperate opposing parts
6. Echo Literally
7. Check contents
8. Be quiet
Shhhh
9. Ask for more...

1) Get an explanation

If there is inconsistency between what is said and what you feel is meant, ask for an explanation

2) Give attention to the speaker

By looking at the person and giving him/her your undivided attention, you give him an opportunity to explain, or elaborate. Keep an open posture, turn your chest towards the person and relax.

3) Support by hm... hm..

If you want the person to continue and elaborate, signal clearly that you are listening and following what is said. Sounds like "mmm... mmm... hm ..." are generally understood to convey that you are listening.

4) Ask

Depending on where you want to lead the conversation or on what you discern, you ask questions to help clear the situation. Usually it is safest to start with information questions. Try to stay close to the information side of the communication, and ask for an explanation.

Back to table of contents

You might want to lead the discussion further by asking questions like "What happened then...? Make sure your partner has finished before asking for more.

If you think the other person's feelings are important to the discussion, you can ask questions like: "How do you feel about that?" But if you are uncertain about the importance of feelings yet, wait.

Near the end you can ask questions about what should/could happen next: What would you like to do now?" If you already have a proposal yourself, you should offer it rather than asking a rhetorical question.

5) Discern opposing messages
If you sense that more than one issue is at stake, try to verbalize that, in order to bring it out in the open. You can use phrases like: "... on the one hand.... on the other hand..."

6) Echo
By echoing the information side of the communication, you can often get the other person to verbalize the most important side of the statement. Repeat with your own words what you understood from the information side.

7) Check content
You can also check the content yourself, so instead of echoing just the information side of the statement, you try out your interpretation of the silent side - the one which is not verbalized but you feel is being communicated.

8) Be quiet
A wonderful way to get your partner in communication to elaborate is simply to be quiet for a few seconds, wait for him/her to add something.

9) Ask for more
Finally you can ask for additional information. Make sure to use "I" statements - "I did not understand" never say "you are so unclear". Try something like: "I am not sure I follow.... Please tell me what happened."

These nine tools are not used in a specific order, although the first thing you do should be to give the person attention, and then work from there.

(Built on an idea from Prof. Jost Reischmann)

Time Out

"What will be your medicine to cure this specific behavioural problem in our company?"

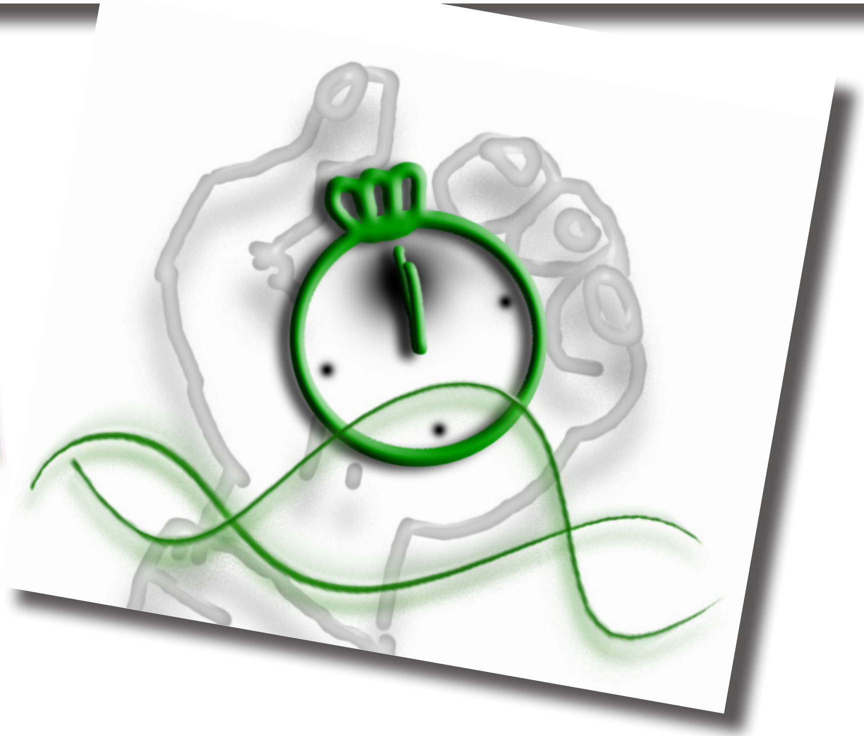
The question implies a rapid, smart, and convincing reply. And if you have one in mind, do not hesitate to present it! But what if the answer to a complex problem or dilemma in the company is not at hand during your consultations with the company?

A possible solution could be to make use of a simple but effective 'time out tool':

- Take over the agenda instead of leaving it to the company
- Suggest a time-out in order to gain time to qualify your answer
- Postpone the question – and the answer – to a later meeting
- Never forget to follow up on the question presented

The 'time out tool' is used here in order to gain time. But in learning processes the same tool can serve the purpose of shifting perspectives during stand stills and situations, where a likely solution to be taken seems to be too narrow-minded.

Make it a style or an expected angle to your endeavours to make use of time-outs... just like they do in basketball, where the concept of time-outs forms an integral part of the game.



Questions

Questions are your major tool when working with your clients. A good question can reveal truths which even the person/s you are talking to / working with did not know of.

Good and useful questions come from thorough knowledge of the field in question, but also from a deep understanding of what you are looking for, what information you need.

Useful questions can be found in books and material on needs assessment, business development, strategic planning etc. It can thus be fruitful to scan various business books, in order to get ideas for questions which can be useful for you.

When you use questions to encourage communication, so called "open questions" are useful. They allow many different "right" answers, making it easier for people to answer them. "Closed questions" tend to limit communication.

Back to table of contents

Questions which begin:

- **What do you think...**
- **How do you feel about...**
- **Talk to me about...**
- **Tell me about...**
- **How do you...**
- **Why do you...**
- **Explain to me... what/how/why**

In toolkits of various methods for working with groups towards specific goals you will find sets of questions which can help groups analyse their work. (See under Group and team tools

Visualisation tools

It can be very useful for a consultant to learn various methods to express him / herself visually and to use various visualisation tools.

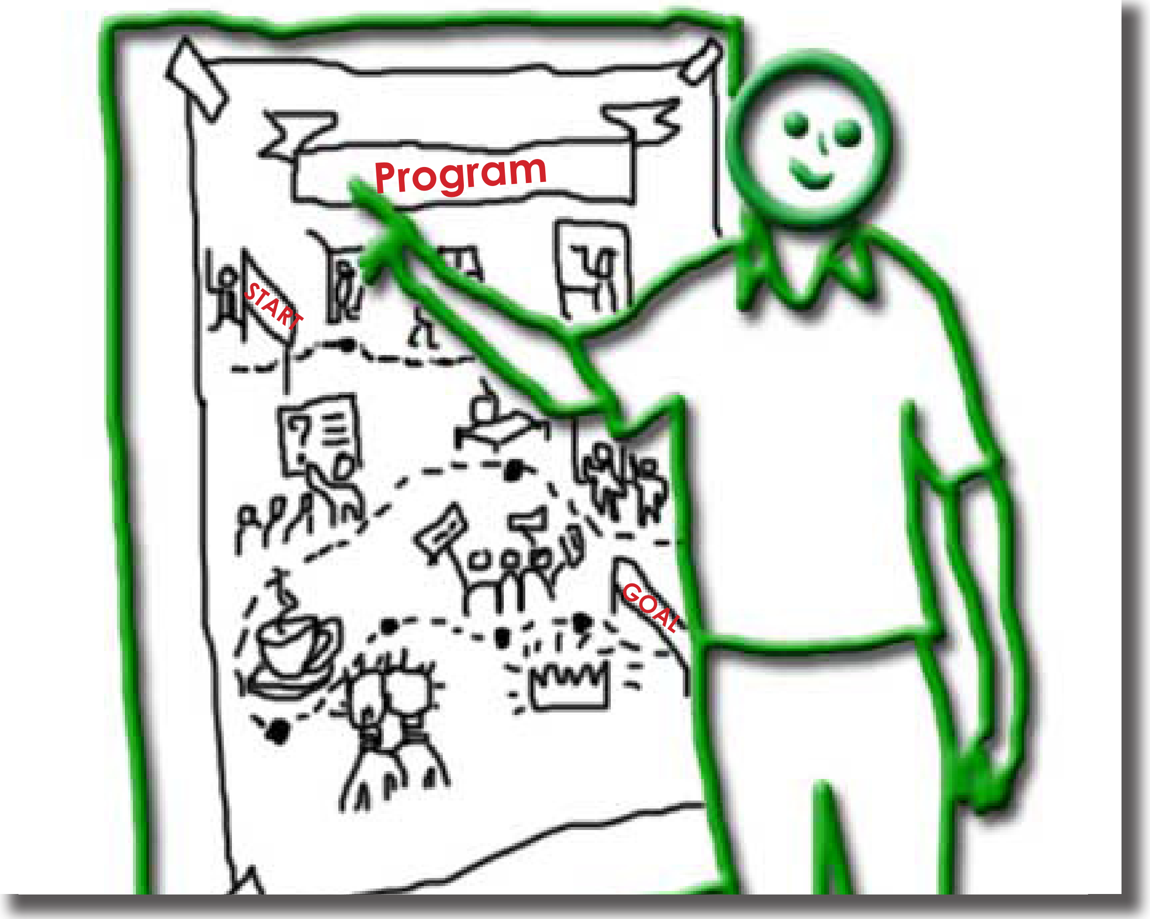
Most of us think visually and are quicker to understand ideas which are presented visually. It is also useful to remember that some people can function professionally in spite of reading problems, by visualizing your ideas you make it easier for them to follow.

Here we present four visualisation tools which might not be part of the toolbox most adult educators have. Other tools such as Flip charts, White boards, Presentation software with projectors, and the well known overhead projectors which were common in classrooms 10-20 years ago, all have their use and are part of an adult educator's repertoire.

Here we present a few which might be an addition for some.

Visual facilitation

This method builds on your establishing a repertoire of visual symbols you use to visually represent the discussion you conduct with your clients. You could also benefit from trying out various graphical forms to use to help your clients to access their knowledge, thoughts or ideas about the issues you are discussing.



Well known graphical forms are for example SWOT analysis

Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
Opportunities:	**Threats:**

Tables such as these can help people formulate their ideas; your task is to find relevant questions or headings for cells of tables, columns, etc.

Situation:	**Dream:**
Obstacles:	**Methods:**

Pin board methods

An interesting way of presenting information to your clients or gathering information from your team is with so called "Moderated discussions" (Moderiertes Gespråch), a method developed in Germany in the 1970s. This method is explained in more detail in the chapter on Group and Team Tools. Here we include it to give you more ideas on how to visually present your ideas to your client.

If you have access to pin boards you can prepare a lecture or presentation by writing key sentences in your presentation on large cards (10x21 cm) and arrange them on the pin-board as you present, building up your argument in front of your listeners as you go.

This is an unusual way of communicating, and in this way you manage to hold your listeners' attention. A nice touch can be to use colours and shapes which you arrange so that they present a simple shape at the end; a circle, house, box... etc.

If you do not have access to pin boards, you can also buy self-adhesive cards and paste them to a wall or whiteboard or you can also use Post-it™ meeting notes to present your case.

See more on this method under **Moderations Method** and **Group and team tools**

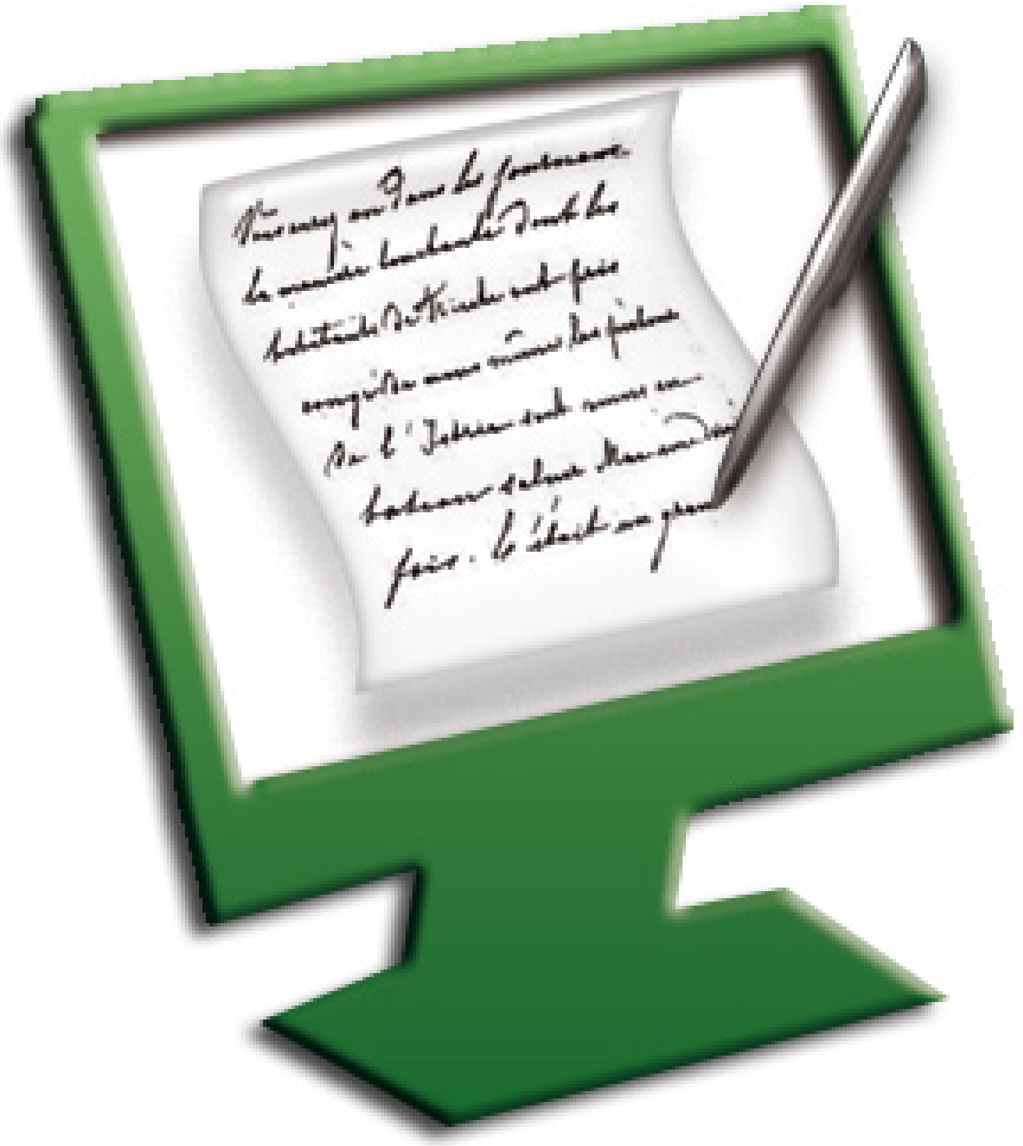
Mind maps

When discussing with your clients you can create Mind Maps on flip charts, whiteboards or on the computer and activate the group guide your work with their input. You can use Mind Maps to both present your ideas and as a tool to discuss them with your clients. You can also use their help to create a Mind Map "on the run" as you gather information from them.

In this way you can probe your clients or specialists into discussing various aspects of the company, company strategies or practises while simultaneously creating a visual presentation of your discussion. If you use a computer to generate the Mind Map, you can save it and send or print for your clients. Likewise it is easy to take a photograph a Mind Map you drew on a whiteboard or on paper with a digital camera or your mobile phone and send to your clients or incorporate it in a report.

This can be a very interactive and energising way to work and visualize your discussion. An added bonus is how easy it is to document.

Back to table of contents



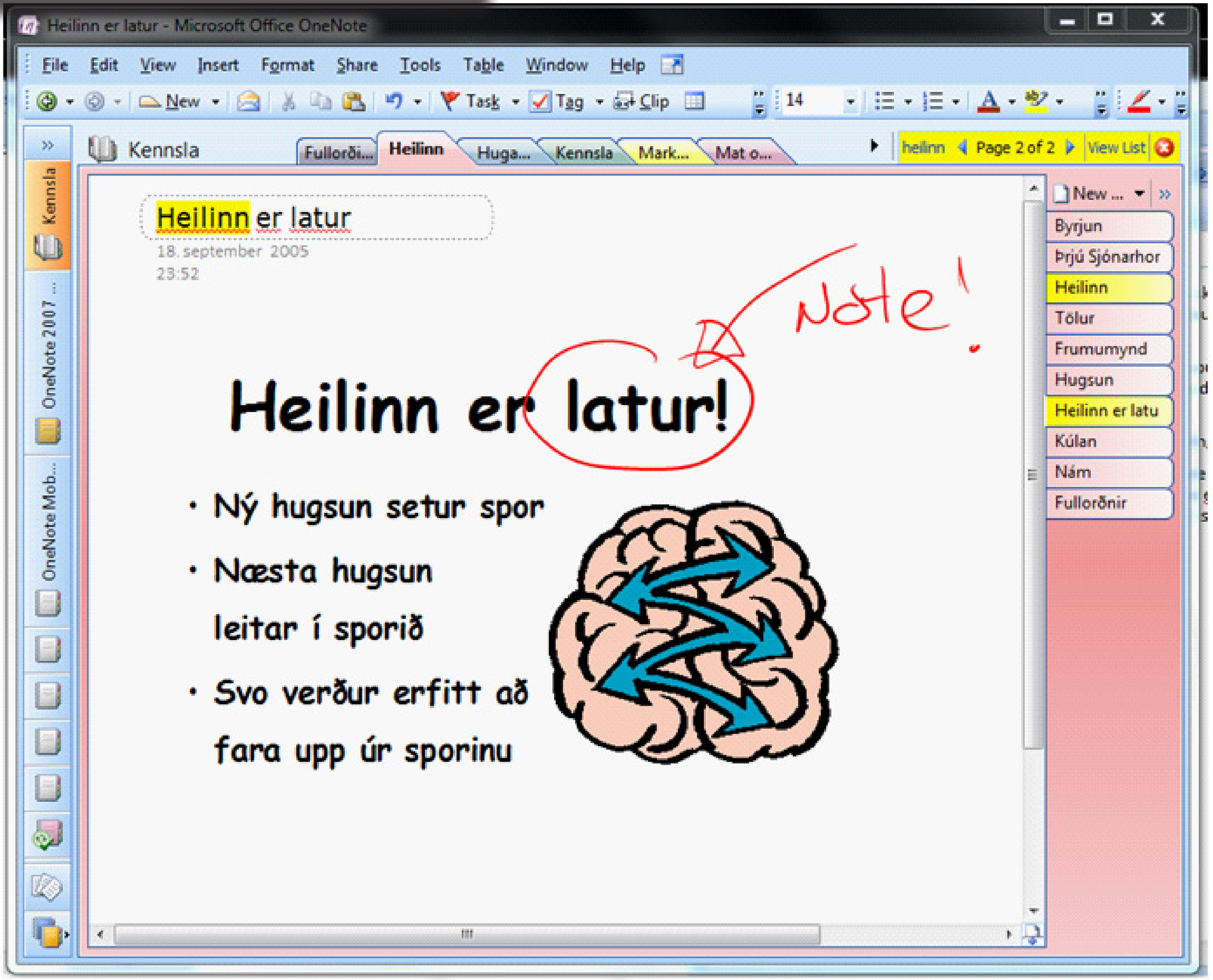
Note taking software

Note taking software allows you to type text, add handwriting, sketches and pictures, insert tables and hyperlinks as freely as you would jot down your thoughts in a physical notebook, on the blackboard or an overhead projector.

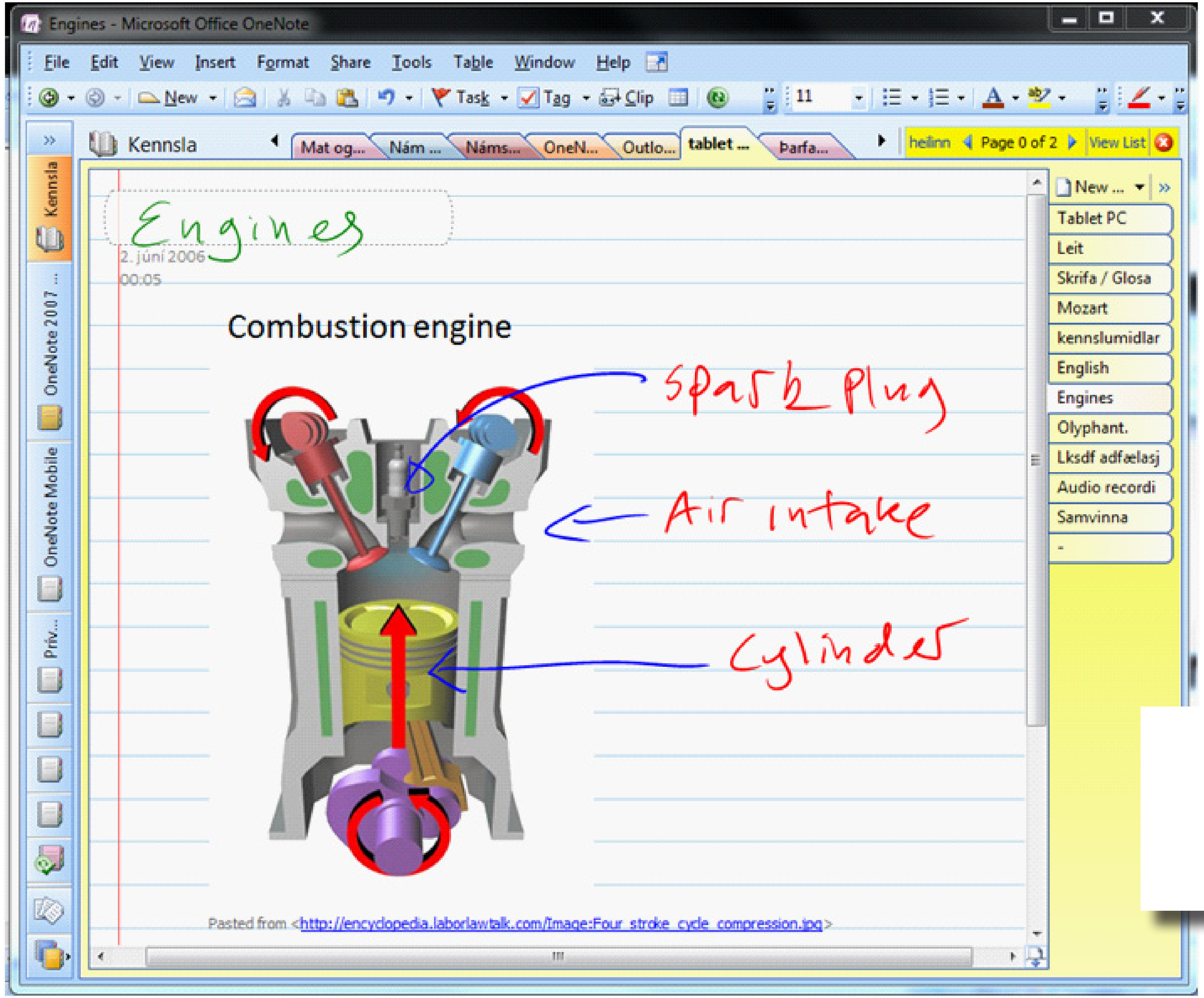
Using software like this allows you to create notes in front of your clients as if you were writing on a whiteboard, and save, print and e-mail your notes directly to those concerned. You can also show them pages you have prepared for the meeting.

Some people import PowerPoint slides into note taking software. This allows you to take notes on top of the slides, or next to them on the run, as well as to easily navigate from one slide to another because each slide has its own tab which is visible all the time.

A screen shot of a PowerPoint presentation imported into OneNote (Note taking software from Microsoft). Note the tabs for each slide, and the writing on top of the slide.



Here a simple note with a picture imported from an online encyclopaedia with annotations.



See a list of
note taking software

Data gathering

There are numerous methods to gather information and data pertinent to your task of needs assessment.

Here we present three tools which each have their very own character and methodology.

Back to table of contents

Interviews

Interviews are an important method to gather data for your analysis. Success factors for your interviews are selecting the right people to interview and asking useful questions.

Your first step is thus to decide who will be your best informants: The staff in question, supervisors, managers, management, etc. You should discuss this with your contact at the company and perhaps other knowledgeable people.

The next step is to develop your "instrument" i.e. decide on how structured the interviews are to be and what questions to ask. With rigorously structured interviews you can get data which can be easily compared, but you lack spontaneity and the potential to adapt or react to new information.

Survey

A well known method for gathering data from individuals is to ask them to answer questionnaires. In a company you should be able to send such questionnaires by e-mail to all involved and thus increase the reliability of your data.

It is not an easy task to create good surveys. Creating good questions takes time and skill, but with good planning it can be very useful for your needs assessment.

Some companies have their own systems where you can create surveys, but you could also use free tools, or pay for the use of such services online.

Surveymonkey.com
kwiksurveys.com
Freeonlinesurveys.com

Group and team tools

Often it is useful to gather a group of knowledgeable people together in order to gain an insight into their view on the matter being studied. The success of such meetings lies very much in whether the methods used fit the goals.

When you have a group of people working together to informing you or work with ideas, it is vital to use methods which help you get the most from each individual, and from the group, so that hopefully the sum of the group gives more than each individual alone.

If you do not plan how to gain the most both from the individual as well as the group, you are deemed to get neither! There are always various things going on in a group which can jeopardize your results: People are easily influenced by each other in group discussions; they might want to please you, or specific people in the group; or strong personalities can, through their participation, direct the discussion in one way and thus [inadvertently] direct it away from useful or interesting areas which other people would have taken up if the discussion had not gone in other directions.

Back to table of contents

There are some known models with their own philosophies which it is useful and wise to know, and some of them you will need to master. We will introduce four such models below.
But it is also possible to take individual methods which have been taken up in the tool-boxes of each model or developed within them and use them individually. Four group methods are described here:

Focus group discussions

Focus groups are frequently used in social sciences and marketing in order to solicit people's meanings, experience and ideas in a natural and neutral environment.

Usually a small group of 5-15 people sit together while one or two facilitators ask questions and steer discussions. There are various approaches as to how active the facilitator should be.

Benefits and problems

There are various benefits of having a group discussing their jobs together, because of a possible synergy effect. One person's idea or comment spurs another's memory or imagination; thus the group members can have a positive influence on each other. However negative effects of group-dynamics are also common knowledge. Power structures, power struggles, likes and dislikes etc. can easily jeopardize a group's effectiveness and results.

How to conduct a Focus Group Session

Preparation:

With your client you should chose groups in accordance with the goals of the need assessment. Take into account the time and the depth of the study and put together groups which are either a narrow group of people knowledgeable about specific procedures in the company, or a wide variety of staff acting as representatives from various departments, depending on your aims and goals. You should be aware of hierarchical structures within the company and how they could influence the outcome of the group.

Prepare questions to ask the group.

Prepare methods to register the discussion:
someone to write down, a recording device, graphical facilitator etc.

Prepare a group room which suits the aims and content of the discussion: Do you want to be close to the staff's working stations, or in a neutral location? Make sure seating, tables, lighting etc. suit your goals (this is part of an adult educator's expertise - so we will not get into details here)

Invite participants in advance, with exact information about goals, use of the information, time, place etc.

Prepare an icebreaker: Even though you are working with a group of people whom you would expect to know each other, this is not always the case. In companies co-workers do not always know each other as well as they think ("What's her name again...?"). Make sure you use an icebreaker which befits the group, the setting and the subject.

The meeting:
Present yourself, your goal and what will be done with the information you gather.

Icebreaker, make sure all participants are introduced and choose an activity which builds trust and a feeling of security and fun.

Start the discussion with easy questions, but not evident ones. Any one should be able to answer them without being ashamed or feeling childish.

Go on to more difficult questions.

Take time to end the meeting:
thank the group for their participation, and let them know how you will use the information you have gathered and how they will become aware of it.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Focus_group
http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm

Group-Mind-Map

Group-mind-maps are a useful method to help groups gather ideas and work with them. With a group mind map you can both tap all the ideas each individual in the group has for your theme as well as benefiting from the collective wisdom of a group working together.

Creating a group mind map

- Start with a clear question, like: "What do we do well in our department?", "What do we do and need to do to reach our goals?"
- Ask each individual in the group to create a brainstorm mind map with answers to the question
- After a predefined time (10 or 20 minutes) ask people to form groups of 3-4 participants and combine all the ideas on the individual mind maps into one collective map for the group
- Take a coffee break
- If you have the time, and really want to squeeze everything you can out of the brains present, repeat steps 2 & 3 and take another break
- Create one common mind map combining everything from all the small-group maps. You can draw this on a whiteboard or a big piece of paper, or use mind mapping software and project your mind map on the wall whilst building it up with the participation of the whole group.

For more details on mind mapping and group mind maps see Buzan, T., & Buzan, B. (1996). The Mind Map Book:
How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential. Plume (Buzan & Buzan, 1996)

Also our online list of bookmarks on **mindmapping** and **mindmapping software**

One Point Questions

When you want to clarify a situation with a group, create discussion, or help a group find a solution, one-point-questions can be of help. Basically they are questions which are posed in writing to a group and each individual in the group answers by placing a self-adhesive point next to the answer he/she chooses.

How do you conduct a one point question?

1. Design your question. (Formulate a clear question, which is easily understood, not complicated and to which the possible answers are clear)

2. Design answering possibilities: Yes / No; scale free from 0% -100%; 

3. Write your question on a flipchart / whiteboard / pinboard

4. When the time is right, ask group members the question, point to it at the same time

5. Briefly explain the question, and the answering possibilities, give an example for an answer: "If you answer 80% place your point here, and if..."

6. Distribute adhesive points to the participants

7. Ask them to decide where they want to put their point

8. Ask them then to stand up all at the same time and put their point next to their chosen answer

9. While the group-members are pasting their points, stand somewhere you cannot see what they are doing and be suddenly very busy doing something else

Back to table of contents

Some possible answering models:

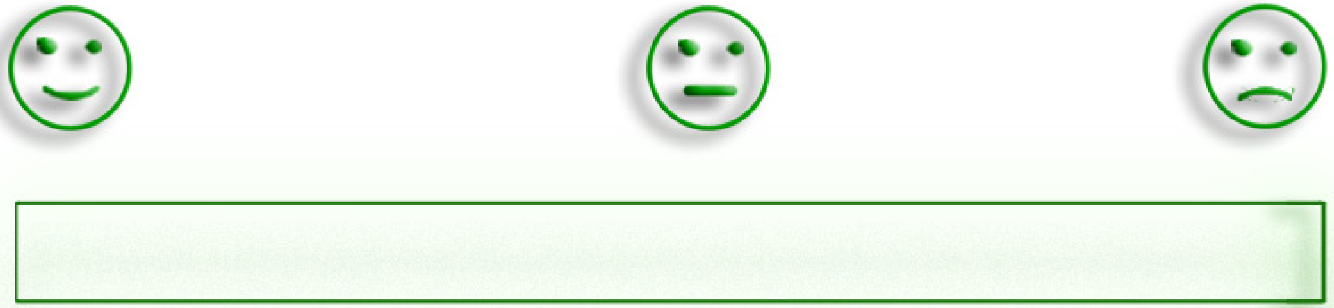
Rubrics:

How do you feel your department is performing now...?

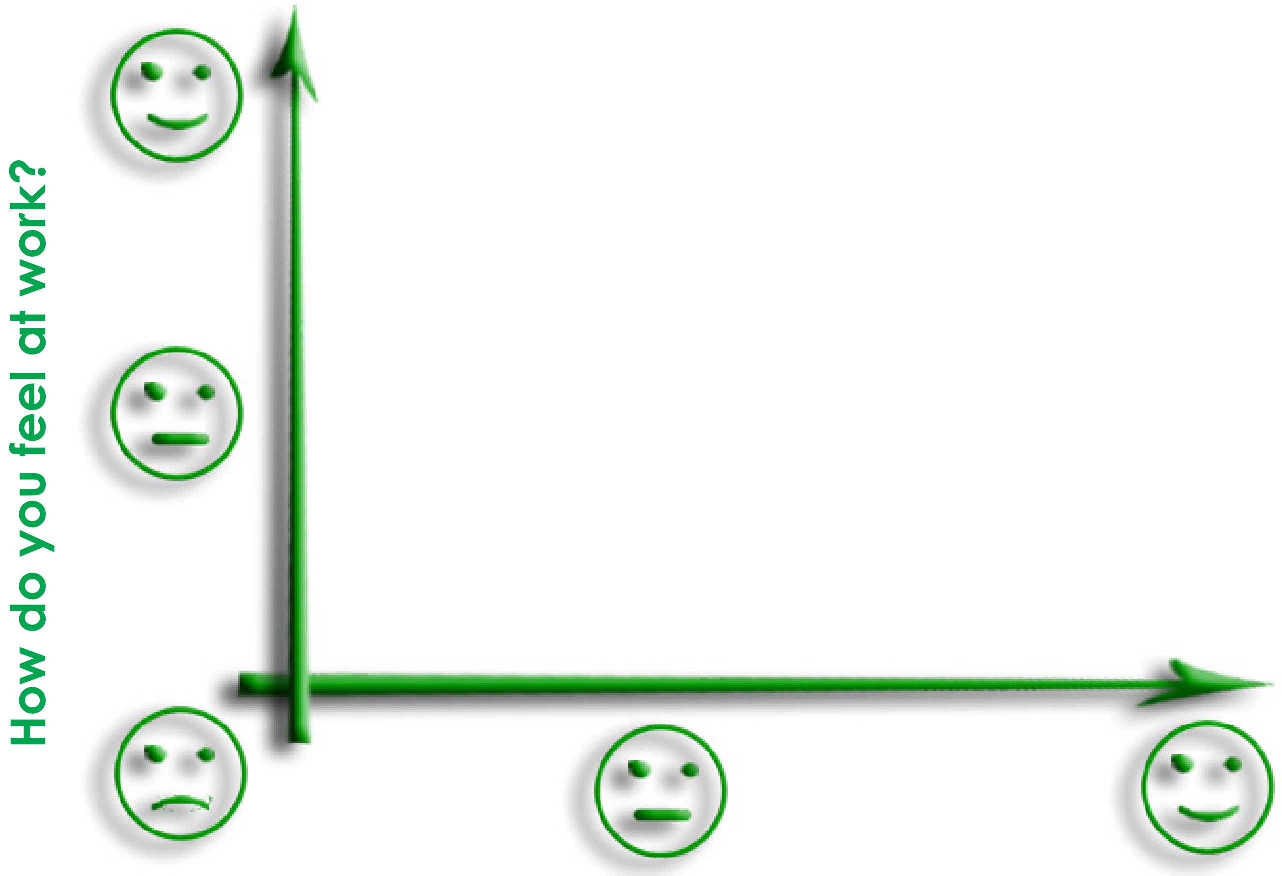
Ineffectivly	Struggling	Efficiently

Scale:

How happy are you with...?



Two dimentional...



How well does your department perform?

Back to table of contents

Card Questions

When brainstorming with a group, group members can easily be influenced by each other resulting in a biased result. If an influential person in the group suggests ideas going in one direction, it is quite likely that other ideas will go in a similar direction and be influenced by it.

Sometimes the matter can be delicate; it can be embarrassing for some to reveal their ideas.

In situations like this it is a good idea to get group members to answer in writing, on their own. One such method comes from the tool box of the Moderations Method and is called "Card Questions"

1. Write your question on a pin board (You can also use white-boards and self-adhesive cards or Post-it™ meeting notes)

2. Point to the question, read it up, and explain it VERY briefly

3. Explain to the group how you want them to answer:

    a. "Write one idea on each card"

    b. "Write with clear big print, so everyone can read the card from a distance"

    c. "7 words and 3 lines max should fit on a card"

4. If you have a big group or short time, you can limit the number of cards you distribute to each participant

5. Distribute cards and fit-tipped pens

6. Give the group time to write – do not disturb them.

7. When you see they slow down their writing, ask if you may gather the cards

8. Shuffle the cards to ensure there is not a series of cards from the same author

9. Now you need to decide how you will deal with the cards; will you

    a. Put all cards unsorted on a pin board and sort them later

    b. Ask a subgroup to sort the cards while you and the other part of the group does something else

    c. Sort the cards with the group now (This is the most popular way to do it; the resulting discussion helps the group clarify its ideas about the theme in question)

10. If you take possibility c., stand in front of the group, holding out the deck of cards

11. Read out the first card (Make sure you are reading it for the first time when the group sees it for the first time. Your handling of the cards should make very clear to the group that you have not manipulated the deck of cards in any way, put certain cards at the end, or eliminated others etc.)

12. The first card you pin in place anywhere on the pin board

13. With the next card, you ask the group whether this card belongs in the same cluster or in a new one. It is useful to place clusters randomly on the board. If there are any objections, simply mark the card with a flash or another symbol and come to it later.

14. When you have clustered all the cards, it is time for a second sorting: Read each card in a specific cluster, one and another one and ask the group if they feel all these cards belong together. If so, find a card you can use as a title (a different colour/size/shape) and ask the group to give this cluster a title, which you ask a group member to write on the title-card. This way you work through all the clusters. It can be useful to draw a line around each cluster when you are finished in order to distinguish the clusters more prominently.

With a board full of ideas you can go on to analyse the content, alone or with the group or divide the group into small groups which deal for example with one cluster each.

For more ideas on methods like this one see:

Schrader, K., & Klebert, E. S. (2000). Winning Group Results (p. 162). Windmühle.

Neuland, M. (1998). The World of Moderation. Managerseminare Verlag.Metaplan. (n.d.).
Metaplan® Basic Techniques, Moderating group discussions using the Metaplan approach.

And more on our **online bookmark list**

Mapping company info

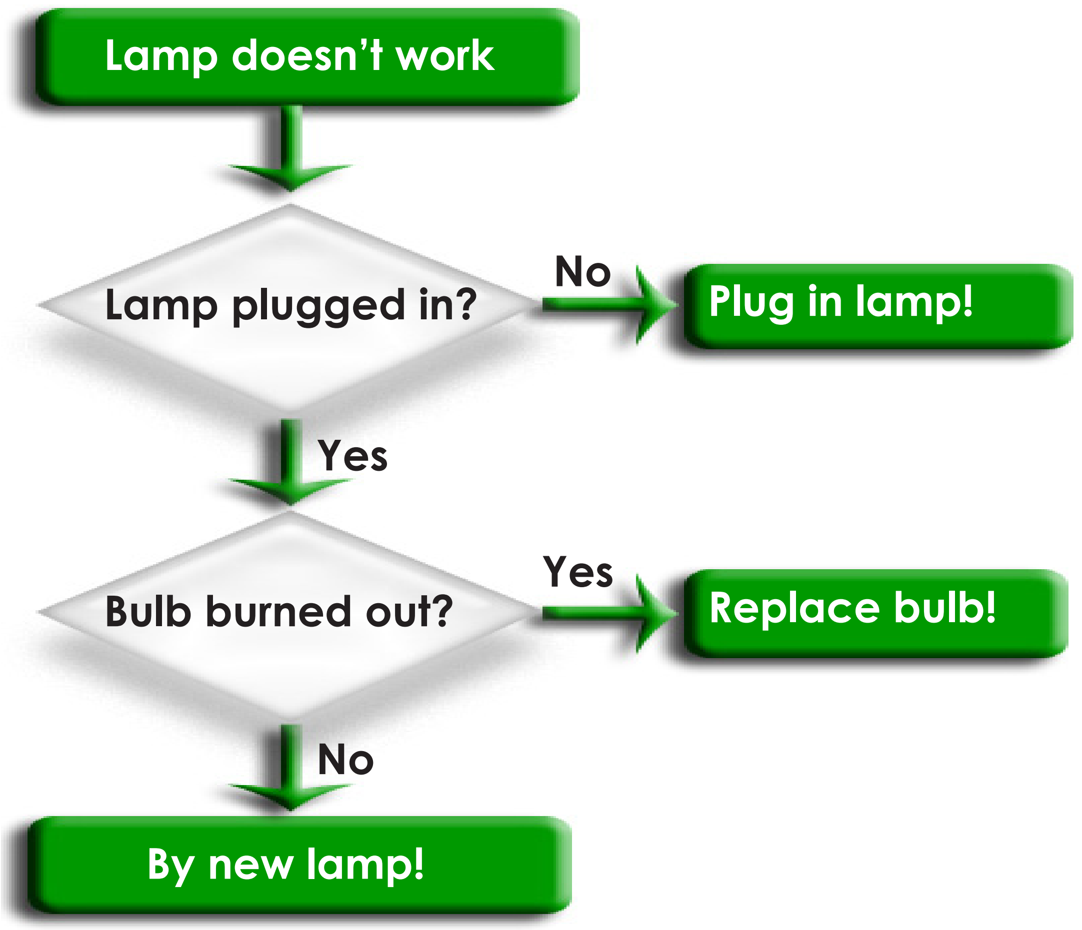
When dealing with complicated data, or even in order to systemize data from various sources, it can be advantageous to use specific ways to create visual presentations of the data. Here you will find pointers towards some useful methods. Moreover it can be very useful for an adult educator to master a few of these methods. Check the references and the list of recommended reading for further directions.

Process mapping

To clarify business processes it can be useful to create a visual map of the process. Symbols used in flow-charting are often used for this purpose as many are familiar with the meaning of at least some of the symbols. To create professional looking maps you can use the drawing tools incorporated into most word processing and presentation programs or programs like Microsoft Visio.

Process maps depict the flow of information, people, documents, customers or equipment through the company.

Process for checking lamps that do not work:



It can be very useful for you to sit with an employee who explains the process of specific jobs he/she has to fulfil. Through your conversation with the employee you will learn a lot about the job, and so will the employee. This map can then be used as a basis to find out where there are possible problems or areas for improvement.

Strategic information

Typically, a strategic needs assessment will consist of some of the following phases:

1. Assessing the current situation
   Establish the nature and extent of problems in performance or outcomes, the problems' scope and which goals management have for the processes in question.

2. External Environment
   There are various external factors which influence an organisation and its performance. In order to understand performance problems, it is can be helpful to map how the most important external factors influence the company. To do this you need to consider: Who are the customers, suppliers, competitors; most important customers and other services or products customers might choose instead of those from the company in question. For each of these external factors, and possibly others, there are various factors to consider in order to create a clear picture of the company's environment.

3. Internal Environment
   Here you would assess how the company addresses the external factors in order to meet its goals. This part of the assessment is built for example on comparing the business strategy to actual performance and determining where there are performance gaps.

4. Future perspectives
   Having mapped performance gaps, you will need to establish what the desired performance looks like.

5. Plan for performance improvement
   Finally it is your task to suggest plans to bridge the gaps and improve performance. These could contain many different activities and changes, ranging from restructuring procedures or workflow, changing tools or equipment to making information available, or creating training programmes.

This chapter is based on: [Gupta, 1999 p.39-61]

Back to table of contents

Competency-dictionary

A useful tool for competency based needs assessment is a competency-dictionary, and based on that a competency-model which depicts what competencies are needed for specific departments and jobs and how the competencies are distributed through the company hierarchy.

After interviewing people about their jobs, you analyse their responses, looking for recurrent themes, or "competency clusters". By reviewing the interview data you should be able to define core competencies for a job or a department.

A table like the one below can be useful to systematically depict various competencies for a specific job or department.

1. Dimension	***Overall statement***
1.1. competency	description
1.2. competency	description
Example	
2. Dimension: Sales Skills	***Overall statement: Meets og exceeds sales goals by anticipating and responding to client's needs***
Persuasion	Effectively uses product knowledge, industry awards, client testimony, negotiation skills and incentive programs to promote sales.
Customer Service	Seeks to improve costomer satisfaction by anticipating and fulfilling the customers' needs and providing on-going quality support and service (Gupta, 1999, p 78)

(For more details see:
Gupta 1999, p. 76 ff, also reference list online)

Competency Model

Based on the Competency Dictionary you can create a competency model; a map of competencies needed for specific jobs or departments in the company.

Having produced a competency model, it will be possible to determine what competencies employees need in order to be hired to the department and also what competencies current employees might need to develop further.

Back to table of contents

Example:

	level 1 job	**level 2 job**	**level 3 job**
Dimension 1	competencies needed	competencies needed	competencies needed
Dimension 2	beginner	intermediate	expert
Dimension 3	execution feedback	directing execution feedback	planning directing execution
Example	Sales associate	Sales manager	Sales executive
Sales Skills: **Meets og exceeds sales goals by anticipating and responding to client's needs**	Prospecting Presentation Persuasion Customer service	Presentation Persuasion Customer service	Presentation Persuasion Customer service

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NVL, Nordic Network for Adult Learning:
http://www.nordvux.net/
Or: **http://www.norden.org/en/nordic-council-of-ministers/council-of-ministers/nordic-council-of-ministers-for-education-and-research-mr-u/institutions-co-operative-bodies-and-working-groups/working-groups-and-boards/nordic-network-for-adult-learning-nvl/**

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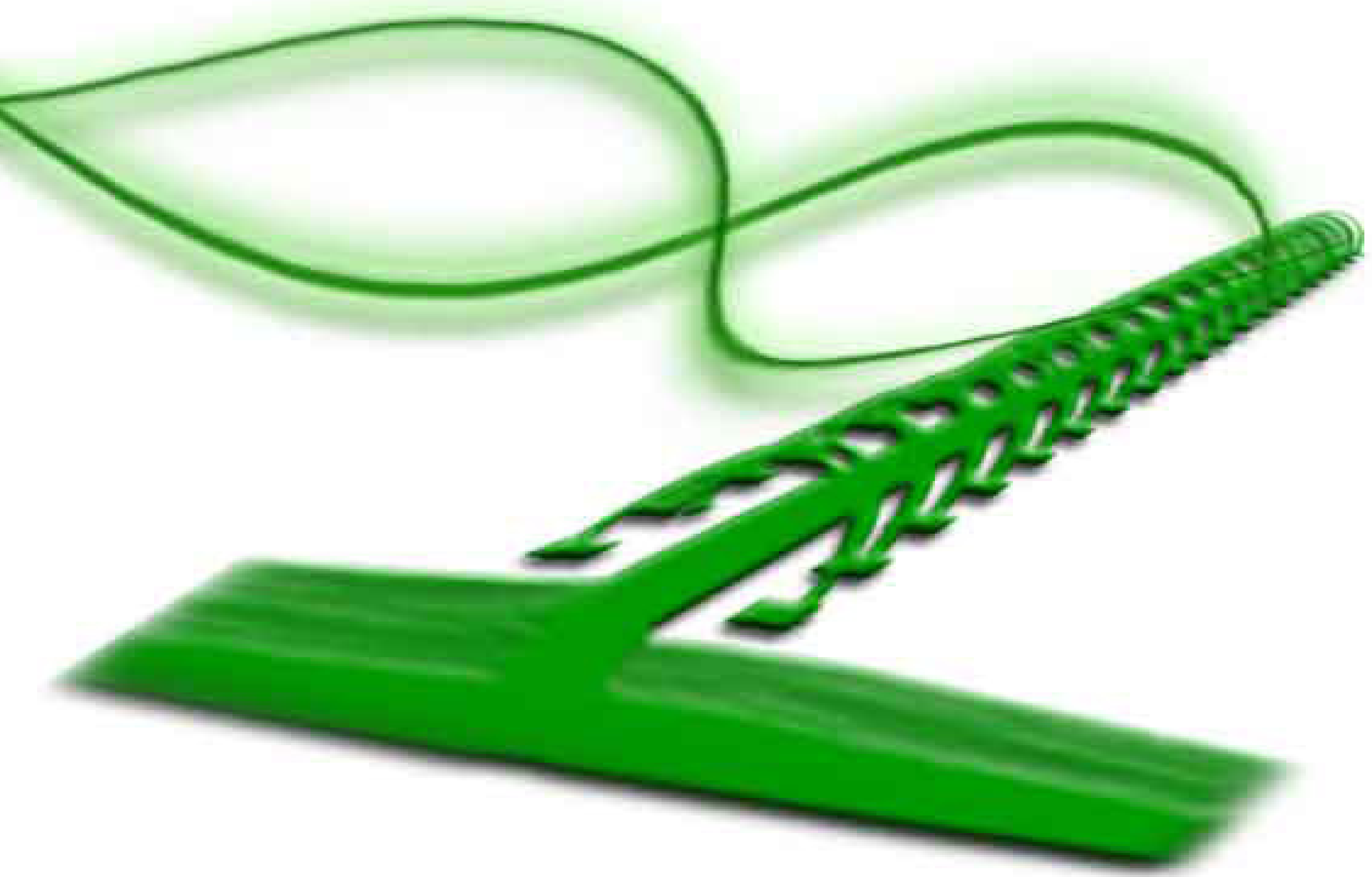
Further Reading



Further reading

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