



United States Department of Agriculture

Agricultural Marketing Service

Creating Opportunities for Farmers and Businesses

Agricultural Marketing Service Training Needs Assessment

Introduction

Since 2012 Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has had a Service Level Agreement with the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Marketing & Regulatory Programs Business Services-Human Resources Division- Center for Training and Organization Development.

In the spring of 2015, an APHIS-AMS liaison team was established. This team consists of three training and organization development practitioners. The mission of the team has been to address the specific non-technical training and professional development needs of AMS employees. In order to accomplish this goal, a training needs assessment proposal was developed. This proposal, which was approved by the senior leadership of both AMS and APHIS articulated the scope of the training needs assessment along with a research methodology and time table.

The purpose of this training needs assessment is to identify the current and future non-technical training and organization development needs of AMS. The development of this training needs assessment complies with the requirements of the AMS-APHIS Service Level Agreement and the guidance offered by The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) that provides specific guidance for federal government agencies to conduct training needs assessments. Additional objectives for this needs assessment include:

- Align and prioritize these non-technical training and organization developments needs with the strategic goals/objectives of AMS and Department and OPM mandates,
- Ascertain suitable training/ learning modalities for each of the identified non-technical training and organization development needs so that AMS employees can receive learning and development opportunities.
- Recommend efficient non-training performance improvement solutions when appropriate. The APHIS team will utilize its expertise to design and deliver the most cost effective learning and

development interventions based on the situational requirements of each prioritized training request.

Executive Summary

This report begins with a brief introduction explaining the reasons for undertaking this training needs assessment. The report proceeds to clarify its specific goals and objectives and the data collection/analysis techniques. The report focuses on the specific training programs and related competencies most requested by AMS employees. In selecting these training programs, a number of additional factors are taken into consideration such as the drivers of AMS's strategic human capital planning process along with their alignment with the current level of training and

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development services AMS currently receives. The report separates training programs that APHIS does not currently offer with training that APHIS does offer that needs to be customized to address AMS's employees' specific learning needs. Each training program/course recommendation begins with related comments from the interviews/focus groups. The final section on recommendations offers organization development and coaching service improvement suggestions. The report concludes with some key findings and improvement suggestions regarding the perception and delivery of training to AMS employees.

Research Methodology / Data Collection and Analysis

The following data collection efforts were involved in this training needs assessment:

- One on one interviews with senior leaders
- Interviews with key stakeholders
- Review of CTOD training records for AMS employees
- Review of relevant documents (such as the AMS Human Capital Plan, Federal Viewpoint Survey data and the AMS-APHIS Service Level Agreement)
- Focus Groups with AMS Directors
- Focus Groups with AMS field employees
- Focus Groups with AMS headquarters employees

Drivers of AMS's Strategic Human Capital Planning Process

In order to fulfill its vision of facilitating a marketing system that quickly and efficiently moves wholesome, affordable agricultural products from producers and traders to market, AMS needs employees with strong collaboration skills along with the ability to successfully manage change in a very dynamic and rapidly changing environment. AMS's human capital planning process addresses the acquisition of these needed skills and focuses on ensuring that the agency has an engaged and properly trained workforce to address its day to day challenges and meet its long term goals and

objectives. The non-technical training that the APHIS-AMS liaison team delivers supports the execution of both of AMS's human capital goals. The training requests that were aligned with AMS's human capital goals and the current level of training services are listed in the next two sections of this report.

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Training Recommendations: Not Currently Offered by APHIS

Training Program: New Employee Orientation/ Onboarding Program

“We used to have New Employee Orientations in the past and they were done very well. They are really missed.”

“New people coming on board need to understand how the agency works. One downside here is we have silos.”

“We can do a better job helping new people to hit the ground running.”

The New Employee Orientation (NEO) program supports integrating and engaging new employees throughout the transitioning process so that they can be acculturated into the organization and provides them with the tools, resources and knowledge to become successful and productive. Networking and developing relationships with key stakeholders and subject matter experts are an essential aspect of this process.

The strategic human capital goals of increasing employee engagement and retention are supported by a well designed and implemented NEO program. Once employees have a better understanding of the “big picture” of AMS, they have a solid foundation for collaboration with their colleagues across the agency and are less inclined to view their work from a parochial perspective. Recent developments include: AMS has completed research on best practices, a new onboarding video has been produced by AMS for new employees, and a new employee handbook has been developed.

Related Competencies:

- AMS Mission, Function and Values
- Relationship Management
- Accountability and Ethics
- Leveraging Diversity and Inclusion (treating others fairly)

- Political Awareness and Savvy

Training Program: Leadership Development Program

“As we move them up in the ranks, up in management, we do a good job teaching them the technical stuff but sometimes we don’t do a good job teaching them how to be managers and successful managers at that.”

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“From an organizational standpoint, we need to make sure we have people with the right skills sets to take on challenges that are coming in the future.”

“We are looking for the next generation of leaders.”

“That was a big part of the old PST program where a deputy would come in and talk about their experience.”

“I took the PST training and even though it is not offered now, I found it has opened so any opportunities for me and I was able to apply what I learned beyond the office.”

Leadership Development Programs supports the development of employees to higher level leadership positions. Years ago, many AMS leaders were trained in the PST program by the Agricultural Marketing Service Training Institute. Since its dissolution, many AMS leaders and employees have requested the design and implementation of a similar leadership development program. A key component of this program would be a curriculum defined by AMS’s competency based on the AMS leadership roadmap that identifies the specific leadership competencies and level of proficiency employees need to attain during their work life cycle.

A competency-based leadership development program would support the succession planning goals of AMS, which is part of their human capital planning. This competency based approach is aligned with the USDA leadership framework and the succession planning guidance of OPM. A member of the APHIS-AMS liaison team is working with the AMS senior leadership and key stakeholders to develop a feasibility report for a leadership development program.

Related Competencies:

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|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| • Accountability | • Entrepreneurship | • Interpersonal Skills |
| • Conflict Management | • External Awareness | • Leveraging Diversity |
| • Continual Learning | • Financial Management | • Oral Communication |
| • Creativity and Innovation | • Flexibility | • Partnering |

- Customer Service
- Human Capital Management
- Political Savvy
- Decisiveness
- Influencing and Negotiating
- Problem Solving
- Developing Others
- Strategic Thinking

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- Written Communication
- Integrity and Honesty
- Public Service Motivation
- Situation Awareness
- Influencing/Negotiating
- Oral Communication
- Customer Service
- Partnering
- Continual Learning

Training Program: Political Savvy

“It’s even more sensitive because if you convey something incorrectly they might take it wrong and the problem is worse than you had before. You have to be very careful with your words.”

“When you’re writing correspondence or responding to somebody, some small farmer someplace in the middle of the country, put yourself in their mind reading it.”

“AMS is a great place to work but as a new employee, I find that sometimes I feel that I am put in sticky situation with loaded question from the public.”

Political savvy identifies the internal and external politics impacting the work of an organization. It develops situational awareness and the ability to understand organizational and political reality and effectively communicate on that understanding. AMS employees at headquarters and in the field are required to operate in a dynamic environment and political savvy is an important competency they need to develop.

Related Competencies:

- Situational Awareness
- Influencing/Negotiating
- Oral Communication

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- Customer Service
- Partnering
- Continual Learning

Training Program: Developing and Implementing an Outward Mindset

“You know, the greater efforts placed on employee engagement, cultural transformation, the differences in generations in the workforce along with our succession continues to put a lot of pressure on us as we are scored on the FVS and that is ratcheted down to the division level.”

“We want to see people rise up. We want to see them fully engaged and really engaged in the true meaning of the word so that they are working together and maximizing their contribution.”

“Sometimes it feels like a million things are coming at you at once and you have to take care of what you are doing and not be concerned about the next guy.”

Based on the New York Times best seller book, *Leadership and Self-Deception*, participants learn the difference between an Inward Mindset (a myopic focus on personal objectives) and an Outward Mindset (taking into account their impact on others) and begin to see the extent to which they have been operating and leading from an Inward Mindset. With the understanding of the negative effects of an Inward Mindset, this discovery awakened within participants a desire to adopt an Outward Mindset to their work.

The collective application of an Outward Mindset with individuals throughout organizations enables breakthrough results and a fundamental shift that lead to substantial and sustainable shift in key human capital management areas such as leadership development, team effectiveness, change management, employee engagement, collaboration and conflict resolution.

Related Competencies:

- Developing Others
- Influencing/Negotiating
- Partnering
- Public Service Motivation
- External Awareness
- Resilience

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Training Recommendations: Currently Offered by APHIS

Training Program: Emotional Intelligence

“We sometimes forget that our audience isn’t always technical people so we have to be more sensitive to them.”

“I often have mixed emotions when I am dealing with the public so I am not sure how I come off to them.

“There is always a lot going on (at work). I wish I could do a better job of handling all this stress.

Course Description: Our emotions play a central role in how we communicate and interact with others. Unfortunately, our emotions aren’t always welcomed in the workplace. We have been conditioned to leave our emotions “at home.” It has been implied that, to be effective, we need to base all of our business strategies and decisions on cold, logical, “intelligence.”

Emotions are a fundamental part of who we are and they influence how people work together. They can’t be left out of the picture. If we were to view emotions as another kind of “intelligence,” beyond reason and logic and we could learn to access it, it could lead to greater collaboration, a higher level of influence with others, more productivity and effectiveness. This course will show you how to manage your emotional brain and utilize your feeling in a more authentic and productive fashion.

Related Competencies:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Regulation
- Social Skill
- Empathy
- Motivation

Training Program: Change Management

“When you are looking at key drivers for our work, you have to consider the rapid pace of change.”

“Keeping up with change is not just a challenge for new employees, it’s a challenge we all face.”
“We got top leaders leaving so that changes everything.”

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Course Description: The challenges organizations face with change often revolve not around the change itself, but rather how the change is done. This course focuses on the popular model developed by John Kotter. His book *Leading Change* is considered one of the best in establishing how to do change. This session goes through a summary of Kotter's 8-phase best practice approach and explores how you can apply it to the changes you manage. This session focuses on understanding and applying Kotter's 8-phases of change. This Leading change training session will support AMS employees because this agency operates in a dynamic and rapidly changing environment.

Related Competencies:

- Empathy
- Continual Learning
- Vision
- External Awareness
- Influencing/Negotiating
- Partnering
- Interpersonal Effectiveness
- Flexibility
- Creativity and Innovation
- Resilience

Training Program: Strategic Leadership

“We need more than just a strategy, we need strategic thinking.”

“We got too many silos; we need to be thinking about the big picture.”

“To be honest, day to day operations take up so much of my time; making it really hard to look at things strategically.”

Course Description: This is an experienced supervisor/executive level leadership workshop intended to improve the capabilities of current as well as future executives to efficiently and effectively position their agency for future success. Participants will learn how to formulate and align objectives and priorities with long-term organizational direction. In addition to the workshop, each participant will be scheduled for a 2-hour one-on-one session with a coach/facilitator.

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Related Competencies:

- Strategic Thinking
- Vision
- External Awareness
- Creativity and Innovation
- Resilience
- Flexibility
- Partnering

Organization Development and Coaching Recommendations:

Organization development (OD) utilizes the expertise of a professional consultant to help organizations to reach their goals. A key emphasis in OD is assisting clients not just in meeting their goals, but with learning new problem-solving skills they can use in the future. The following services are recommended to support AMS's strategic human capital goals:

Action Learning

Action Learning solves problems and develops leaders simultaneously because it encourages participants to think critically and work collaboratively. Action learning is particularly effective for solving complex problems that may appear unsolvable. The action learning process assists group members in reflecting not on their problem solving but on the elevation of their group functioning as well as focusing on examples of their leadership skills. In this way, action learning participants become effective leaders as they solve difficult problems.

Coaching

Executive coaching supports the improvement of leader's interpersonal competence so that they can take effective action to pursue organizational goals. Some AMS leaders have received referral to qualified coaches. Many federal government agencies also have peer coaching programs that utilize internal coaches to increase its availability throughout their workforce. Both USDA and OPM have robust internal coaching programs. The development of this capacity would support the achievement of AMS strategic human capital goals, particularly in the areas of leadership development and employee engagement.

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Key Findings

1. AMS employees generally have a favorable impression of the APHIS courses they have attended

“The instructors for the APHIS training always seem knowledgeable and well informed regarding the subject matter.”

“We really like the webinars you can get some really good information right at your desk.”

“The availability of the training is definitely a strong point. I mean one of the things I have seen is that APHIS tries to have several options throughout the year to take a particular subject course.”

“We were placed on mute the entire webinar. I don’t think that is good adult training practice.”

These responses along with a review of the many positive course evaluations demonstrate in most situations the AMS employees are having successful learning experiences with APHIS non-technical training. The positive learning experiences of AMS employees support their ongoing workplace engagement. The final comment in this section demonstrates that employees prefer highly interactive training environments.

2. Over the past year, there has been a decline in the enrollment of AMS employees in APHIS training courses

Fiscal Year	# Offerings available to AMS	AMS Enrolled	AMS Attended	AMS Attendance Rate
2014	137	790	581	74%
2015	140	603	438	73%

In the past year, APHIS-AMS liaison team was introduced to AMS staff and they provided a full range of training and development services. Some of these services included regular meetings with senior leaders, and leading training discussions at Brown Bag sessions on training and development topics. However, in spite of these activities there was an overall decline in AMS attendance by 23.7% from 2014 to 2015. Well-designed training that focuses on workplace learning can increase employee engagement and agency productivity, which are strategic goals of AMS. It may be helpful

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to monitor this trend in 2016 to ascertain if additional outreach and marketing activities need to be executed in order to gain greater participation from AMS employees

3. AMS employees have expressed major concerns regarding access to APHIS courses

“The AMS Voice listings only provide the course title. We really need a course description so we know what the course is about.”

“It would be nice if a yearly calendar was available so we could see months in advance when courses are available.”

“The links for training in the Voice don’t work.”

“As soon as I see the course listed in the Voice and I try to register for it, it too late the class is already filled.”

“It be more advantageous too, if they had courses here that would be in DC as opposed to Riverdale.”

These focus group comments demonstrate that many AMS employees don’t understand how to access APHIS training, and in some cases, they are having technical difficulties and are not getting the support they need to overcome these difficulties. This lack of support may lead to greater employee frustration and disengagement and could possibly exacerbate the decreased AMS employee enrollment that was previously noted.

One possible outcome of this situation is that it may become more difficult to reach the “critical mass” needed to implement new initiatives that require a change in behavior if fewer employees feel comfortable accessing APHIS courses. In order to address these concerns regarding AMS employee access, the APHIS-AMS liaison team will develop a webinar that provides details on how to access training information on the SharePoint site along with training outreach materials

4. AMS field employees (especially in small offices) feel that they do not get the same training opportunities as their counterparts in larger offices and at HQ.

“In our office, there are three of us that work, and time is an issue. When you are so busy just trying to get the day to day work done that when you want to do the class or if you want to do something on AgLearn, you just don’t have that time. I mean time is an issue.”

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“So in order to have the time to train, you have to have the staffing levels at such a level that you can do that stuff and it’s almost like a wish or a Christmas gift, you know what I mean. That is just not happening and it has not happened for several years in my opinion.”

“I am going to call names about the training that they had in their office. Well I am part of that same group except that I am in another office, a small field office and that training wasn’t available to us. Now when I go over into a job interview for a promotion or anything, these guys in that office have had that training and I have not.”

In the focus group discussions with field employees, many of them felt that working in smaller offices limits their access to training and the possibility of using training to support their career advancement. Increasing employee engagement is an ongoing strategic goal of AMS. Providing training that supports workplace productivity and career development are important factors that many field employees feel are presently lacking.

Training Infrastructure Recommendations

The recommendations listed below address the training infrastructure needs:

- Greater collaboration between AMS and the APHIS-AMS liaison team so that leaders and employees at AMS understand how to access APHIS training. The development of desk aids, outreach materials and their placement on AMS’s web site could support greater employee access to this training.
- A formal AMS training infrastructure that consists of AMS employees serving as coordinators for training in their work units would support ongoing APHIS-AMS liaison team training activities and provide an internal point of contact for AMS employees.
- AMS has a large portion of its workforce in the field and it has strategic goals to improve communication. Using webinars for training has had some degree of success but the utilization of more recent learning technologies that are asynchronous and interactive may provide a learning environment that is more appropriate for the AMS workforce.
- On strategic initiatives, AMS and the APHIS-AMS liaison team should collaborate to develop Level Three Kirkpatrick evaluations to ensure that actual work place learning is applied.