Pre-Conference Workshop 4: Increasing staff capability to drive organisational performance: inspiration based on evidence

Dr John Mitchell, Lead Consultant, ACER JMA Analytics
Stephen Conway, Chair, TDA Board, Chief Executive Officer, TasTAFE
Gail Eaton-Briggs, Executive Manager Education Services, TasTAFE

Every organisational leader would relish an evidence base upon which to plan targeted capability development in order to drive organisational performance and business growth. While this workshop focused on how TasTAFE acquired and used such an evidence base, the lessons in the Tasmania case study are relevant to every organisation.

The workshop at the TAFE Directors Australia conference in Hobart on 9th September 2015 showed how TasTAFE, over an eighteen month period from early 2014, used a set of seven capability analysis tools (CATs) provided by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) JMA Analytics to engage staff, build capability, develop a unified culture and set new goals based on evidence about the existing and potential strengths in its staff.

TasTAFE implemented seven CATs as set out in the Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability analysis tool (CAT)</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Date implemented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ADMINCAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to upskill the administration workforce</td>
<td>All staff in administration or support roles</td>
<td>February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. COMPLETIONCAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to boost student completion rates</td>
<td>All staff</td>
<td>February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. MANAGECAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to improve management performance</td>
<td>Managers, from supervisor to executive level</td>
<td>April 2014 (repeated 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. VETCAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to enhance training and effectiveness</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CURCAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to maintain industry currency</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. GROWCAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to grow your business</td>
<td>All staff</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. LEADCAT®</td>
<td>Capability data to increase leadership effectiveness</td>
<td>Leaders, from Band 7 to executive</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This case study will be of interest to all organisations seeking to ‘turn around’ their organisations, with the active support of their staff, based on concrete data about staff strengths, potential, gaps, motivations and learning styles, patterns and preferences.

To commence the workshop, the background context for this organisational rejuvenation was provided by Stephen Conway, TasTAFE CEO.

Then Dr John Mitchell, ACER JMA Analytics lead consultant, discussed how TasTAFE’s leading edge approach to using the CATs data built on the implementation of the CATs by 32 TAFE Institutes nationally over the last six years. John showed how TasTAFE has not only built on that national foundation, it has invented new practices in HR Analytics in VET.

Explanations about how TasTAFE implemented the CATs so effectively and is now using the data generated by them to obtain multiple benefits were provided by Gail Eaton-Briggs, Executive Manager Education Services, TasTAFE.

Excerpt from interview

Following is an excerpt from an interview with Gail Eaton-Briggs conducted by John Mitchell in March 2015 on the topic of “Using seven CATs to grow the business”. The interview was conducted two weeks after GROWCAT® was launched and before LEADCAT® was implemented. The full interview is available at this site: http://jmaanalytics.acer.edu.au/user-benefits/client-interviews

(John M) TasTAFE is the first organisation in Australia to implement seven capability analysis tools. What lies behind TasTAFE’s commitment to capability analysis?

(Gail E-B) When TasTAFE was first established the Board agreed on the inaugural corporate plan but it was very clear that there were a number of areas in that corporate plan that we were not going to be able to achieve if we did not build on the current levels of [staff] capability. Some of those areas were the decision to put student needs at the centre of our activities, making a priority of organisational growth based on student/client needs, undertaking a staff benchmarking exercise and ensuring that we met the performance management framework around our funding contracts.

So we decided that we couldn't just expect that building of capability to happen: it can't really be a hit and miss approach to capability building because all those corporate goals underpin the sustainability and the success of the organisation. Adding that to the fact that we have a very strong reputation to uphold as well, as deliverers of high-quality VET, we decided that we would commit to building capability and of course to do that we needed to know where our staff capability actually was, hence the implementation of the analysis tools.

You have implemented the CATs at a time of some upheaval, first with the amalgamation of the Skills Institute and the Polytechnic, then with funding challenges and now with an organisational restructure. Many other organisations say that they cannot implement CATs until conditions are settled. Why did you go ahead with the CATs in this time of great change?

In recent years the public training provider here in Tasmania has undergone a number of iterations that have been created through government reforms. About six years ago, TAFE Tasmania was split into two organisations, a Polytechnic and a Skills Institute and over the next five years each of those organisations developed their own culture, their own norms, their own capabilities, based on the student cohorts for whom they were delivering vocational education and training.

When TasTAFE was created by legislation in July 2013 it was clear that the capabilities were patchy,
depending on where staff had come from and what their experience had been over the previous five years. So we needed to build capability, but as well as that we also needed some kind of tool to bring two groups of staff together – as a bonding exercise if you like – and that needed a planned approach.

We needed to form brand new teams at TasTAFE and we could have done that in a whole range of ways and we used a number of strategies, but one of the keys was to get people working together on the capability analysis tools (CATs), the related surveys and the follow-up.

**Staff response levels to the CATs have been exceptional, compared with national trends. Why, do you think, staff have been so responsive?**

Our staff love an opportunity to get together and work on something that is across the organisation and so we’ve not had trouble getting people to attend the face-to-face launches of CATs for example and being able to come and sit together. You’ve probably noticed when you’ve been here that every time you stop talking they start talking to each other because it’s one of the things that they like to do.

We had our communication and marketing team involved really early on and they came up with a professionally designed logo for the CAT projects and some collateral such as mouse pads and posters and also the CEO promoted it through his regular ‘staff update’. We made the capability analysis project really visible, we made it a key strategy for the organisation and the staff. The staff would have seen some evidence that the CATs were on the way well before we actually made the survey available to them.

To maintain that momentum one of our young women in the marketing team really embraced the CATs and promoted them internally. She has been very creative and very persistent in the way that she has targeted various strategies for different CATs. The CATs have had different audiences and she has been very creative around how she targeted them. We haven’t had an enormous budget for marketing but it hasn’t stopped her from being able to run competitions, give away morning teas, and give away TasTAFE goodie bags to individuals and groups.

The other thing that we’ve done is convene a group called the Continuing CATs Conversation Committee (CCCC). At TasTAFE we don’t have a large department that can manage this whole of organisation capability building approach so I’ve been able to secure the commitment of people who are genuinely interested in taking their CATs forward. We’ve formed this CCCC group of people who are keeping the follow-up work alive through individual projects and updates in the ‘staff update’ that goes out fortnightly. The CCCC group is keeping the CATs visible and when something new occurs we put it up on the intranet so that people know that this has happened as a result of the CATs.

**In your experience, what are the immediate benefits of using the CATs?**

One of our TasTAFE values is being connected, so by default just having these CAT surveys means that we’ve got email going out talking about the CATs, they’re mentioned in the staff update, and it’s helping us form that one TasTAFE, one team approach. And we have started to use the data as an evidence base upon which to design tactics, programs and strategies; so there are very immediate benefits for us.

**What long term benefits or advantages do you believe will emerge for TasTAFE from using the CATs?**

One of the things that we do need to do as TasTAFE is to develop a workforce development plan. We don’t have that yet but I do think that the CATs are going to enable us to have an evidence base on
which to build the workforce development plan. I do think that the benefits that we get out of paying attention to the COMPLETIONCAT® data will see us in better financial shape: we will get more completions and that is going to translate into dollars.

I think what’s starting to emerge at TasTAFE is a new respect for teachers as professional practising teachers, so a focus on VETCAT® and CURCAT® data and many of the aspects of COMPLETIONCAT® is going to impact directly on the professional development that the teachers receive and access and are inspired to access.

As well as that, as a result of MANAGECAT®, our managers are going to be more respectful of our core business. In some of the skills sets in MANAGECAT® that you would expect managers in an education environment to be really strong in, they themselves, say they aren’t, so we need to flip that around and work with them on that because our core business is vocational education and training and we need to be great at managing it.

Is there anything else about the CATs that you would like to comment on?

I would like to say to other organisations that are thinking about using CATS my instinct is always to look at how you stack up against the national averages for CAT skills sets and I had to tone myself down in relation to that because, even if we had a low score (across the organisation), some of the national averages might have been low as well. I needed to recognise the message “don’t beat yourself up, take the CAT information for what it is and then aim to build on it and improve”.

One of the things that I’ve noticed that has been terrific for me is that the corporate plan that was developed by the TasTAFE Board has a number of priorities that are actually supported by the data that’s coming out of the CATs. The data supports the reason why an organisation would need to do something or act in a particular way. It also gives you the impetus to say to the staff whom you need to get on board not just that the TasTAFE Board has a corporate plan that says you need to have a need to work in partnership, we actually have data that comes out of COMPLETIONCAT® that says if we can work much more strongly in partnership with others we will have better outcomes for our students.

That is a powerful conversation to have with staff. I think that the suite of capability analysis tools enables you to join the dots if you’re smart enough to look out for where those connections are.

The final thing I would like to say is that the capability analysis tools are completely defensible: I love the fact that they are psychometrically tested, they provide an evidence base and they are not just done and dusted within a couple of weeks, it is a long-term process and we are looking forward to using them again in a couple of years to see how the capability of the TasTAFE staff has grown.