

Are you trapped in the training Catch-22: no capacity = no capability?

An informal survey conducted July-August 2023 to find out why we're not training our staff.

Survey conducted by Clare Feeney, Director of Environmental Communications Ltd and Founder of the Environment and Sustainability Strategic Training Institute.

Why did I conduct this survey?

My **SkillOmeter** went down a treat at a series of conferences in 2022, revealing the stages of pain we're experiencing in the ongoing environmental skills shortage. Several people approached me about how I could support their in-house professional training – but within six months a clear pattern had emerged:

- everyone started out highly motivated by a series of lightbulb moments;
- everyone was 100% clear about what they wanted to do and how to do it;
- everyone was very clear that the best business value would be having their own staff develop and deliver their own in-house training – and
- no-one had the capacity to do it.

Yes – it was a perfect Catch-22; a paradoxical situation from which there is no escape because of contradictory rules or limitations. The environmental training Catch-22 sees organisations trapped by the tensions between capacity and capability, spiralling into an endless do-nothing loop.

Do barriers leap into your path to stymie your in-house training? What are they? And how can we break out of this Catch-22?

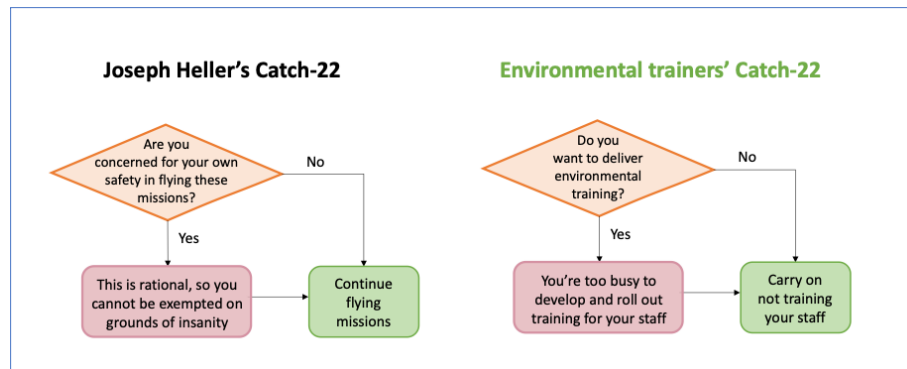
Overleaf I lead in with a summary and discussion before summarising the answers provided by the eight over-busy but generous environmental consultants who responded to the survey – many thanks to you all!

List of questions:

1. How would you describe your organisation's current **capability** (knowledge and skills) to deliver on the Government's raft of resource management, climate change, freshwater, three waters, infrastructure and other environmental reforms?
2. How would you describe your organisation's current **capacity** (the headcount of people we need with the necessary knowledge and skills) to deliver on the Government's raft of resource management, climate change, freshwater, three waters, infrastructure and other environmental reforms?
3. Please describe your past in-house training/capability initiatives.
4. Please describe **what worked well** for your past in-house training/capability initiatives
5. Please describe what **didn't** work well for your past in-house training/capability initiatives:
6. What kinds of support/resourcing – and from whom – could help you to develop and deliver the in-house training/capability initiatives you would ideally like to roll out?
7. How well do environment and sustainability training offers from professional associations, councils and other sources (please describe the latter sources) meet your professional training/capability needs?
8. What other comment, observations or questions do you have about getting out of our skills Catch-22 and growing our environmental capability and capacity?
9. What are your main motives for in-house training at this time?
10. Other options and further comments.

Note: Of course we can't express numbers lower than 100 as a percentage with any validity, but Survey Monkey does it anyway and I hope it doesn't annoy you too much!

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



Most of the respondents were feeling stretched to deliver on the emerging outcomes the government wants from the environmental professions and experiencing a lack of several of the core competencies required. Others noted that appropriate training is not always available, but there's also no time or budget for training staff. Several had tried to set up in-house training but had not been able to pull it off due to the pressure of work. Initiatives that had worked were narrow and specific in their focus but were core to the organisation's business.

Things that did not work well for in-house training included lack of capacity of expert staff to develop and deliver training because of their other responsibilities, making it very difficult to find the balance of needing to train staff but also needing to deliver chargeable work. High staff turnover was also an issue. In-house training needed clear direction and budget from senior management to make training a priority. Options included making use of in-house or external expert support; employing a learning and development staffer; or redeploying an existing expert staff member into a dedicated environmental training role.

Several respondents commented that some good courses are available (though not always within New Zealand) but they don't necessarily fit together and not all of the content is relevant. However some professional associations are delivering a good training that is relevant to the industry.

Another respondent noted that it's difficult to proceed with training while the value case is not sufficiently well defined to justify the excess time and monetary costs initially involved in developing it.

One respondent noted that 'a period of pain' is the only way to break out of this, while also observing that people are already working too hard.

One respondent noted that a budget for industry training from central government would be important, while another suggested that it's very important to resurrect the industry training initiatives led by councils in the past, such as the widely subscribed erosion and sediment control training.

Interestingly, none of the respondents indicated that developing their own in-house training would subsequently generate an income stream for the business from delivering external training to other agencies. The motives for wanting to roll out in-house training at this time were, in order of priority, to:

- comply with new legislative requirements;
- attract and retain good staff;
- seize the opportunity to lead change;
- lift productivity by reducing the volume of rework review and supervision; and
- successfully bid for more interesting important or remunerative work.

It is worrying that while respondents wanted to train their staff so as to help them support clients to comply with legislative requirements, pressure of work meant they were largely unable to do so.

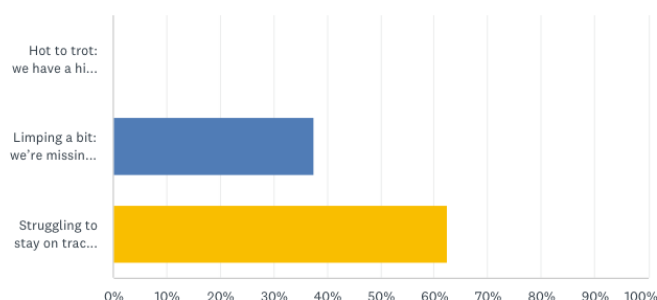
The good news?

Firstly, respondents are well aware of the Capability/Capacity Catch-22 we're in, and are valiantly doing their best to break out of it, offering some excellent suggestions as to how we can do this.

Secondly, this is a core focus of my work. Here I gratefully acknowledge the support of ConCOVE (the Construction and Infrastructure Centre of Vocational Excellence) and four sterling industry associations; Carbon & Energy Professionals, Civil Contractors New Zealand and Water New Zealand. [Watch this space!](#)

SURVEY RESPONSES

Q1 How would you describe your organisation's current capability (knowledge and skills) to deliver on the Government's raft of resource management, climate change, freshwater, three waters, infrastructure and other environmental reforms?

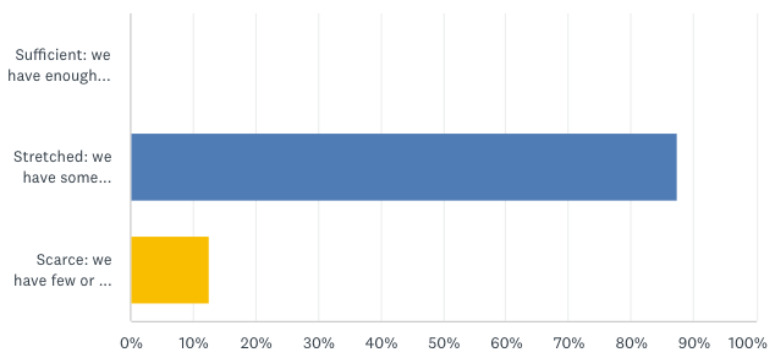


Answer choices	%	Nō
Hot to trot: we have a high level of professional competence across all the skills needed to deliver the Government's emerging environment and sustainability outcomes	0	0
Limping a bit: we're missing some of the professional competencies needed to deliver the Government's emerging environment and sustainability outcomes	38	3
Struggling to stay on track: we are missing several or most of the professional competencies needed to deliver the Government's emerging environment and sustainability outcomes	62	5
TOTAL	100	8

Comments

1. Even answering this question I flip-flopped - we have key individuals with a lot of knowledge, but it is not shared consistently across the team. To be hot to trot across the team will take a lot of investment in training. I also considered selecting "struggling to stay on track" as I feel it may be that we don't even know what we don't know - and therefore whether we are on track! However - based on interactions with our peers, even if we are a long way from "hot to trot" I think we are "above average" in terms of industry readiness.
2. Insufficient time is the culprit with this. We would benefit from a distilled overview of the key changes and things to look out for.
3. It's not just that people are too busy. A further problem is that appropriate courses are not always available and often it is required to complete a whole course when only part of the course is what is wanted.
4. The participants are keen, but there is no time, training, government guidelines or targets, no budget and no space for additional staff. Local councils are losing staff continuously due to exhaustion and a feeling of being overwhelmed by the multitude of proposals.

Q2 How would you describe your organisation's current capacity (the headcount of people we need with the necessary knowledge and skills) to deliver on the above reforms?

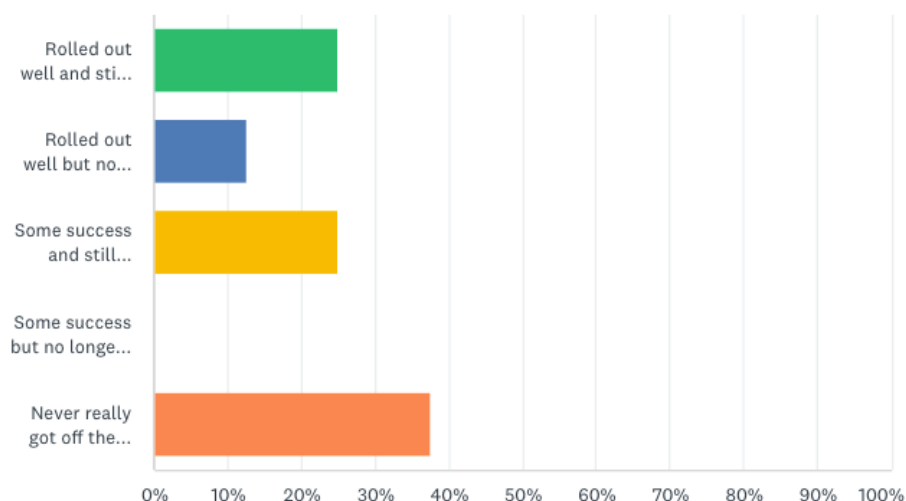


Answer choices	%	Nō
Sufficient: we have enough people with the skills needed to deliver the Government's emerging environment and sustainability outcomes	0	0
Stretched: we have some people with the skills needed to deliver the Government's emerging environment and sustainability outcomes, but they are over-extended	88	7
Scarce: we have few or no people with the skills needed to deliver the Government's emerging environment and sustainability outcomes	12	1
TOTAL	100	8

Comments

1. It is difficult to get the balance right between specialised in-house training and external training. Those who would deliver in-house training also have full time jobs doing other things.
2. The simplest of terms require a level of understanding. For example, what does 'boundary' mean in the context of GHG emissions? There is no standard boundary or guideline from central government on what a boundary should be for a local council, so it's down to guess work. Additionally, because there is no standard boundary, there is no comparison available between local councils.

Q3 Please describe your past in-house training/capability initiatives:



Answer choices	%	Nō
Rolled out well and still going as needed	25	2
Rolled out well but no longer going	12	1
Some success and still happens sometimes	25	2
Some success but no longer going	0	0
Never really got off the ground	38	3
TOTAL	100	8

Comments

1. We have lots of ideas, and areas where we want to create training programmes in house. We have also identified where we think we can weave in external courses as part of our development programme. However, we have not managed to pull it together into a cohesive plan, with clear objectives re outcomes and who/how we need to grow our team, and roll it out. It is in the "wouldn't it be awesome if..." category.
2. We are a new organisation (less than two years old) so have only recently rolled out our first few big projects.
3. The staff that were to attend left us.

Q4 Please describe what worked well for your past in-house training/capability initiatives:

1. Dedicated resource to implementing the training, contracting in external support to kick start the programme
2. Good comms plan. Involvement of organisation in the development. Manager backing
3. Firm direction on expectations from C-suite
4. Sharing experiences/knowledge within the team helped with know-how while also enhancing cohesiveness and culture in our team
5. Base foundational knowledge for new starts. Detailed specific training on the instruments that are specific to our work. EG standards and rules
6. Staff initiative and passion
7. Face to face training-practical. Fun visual training material

Q5 Please describe what didn't work well for your past in-house training/capability initiatives:

1. Expecting that we can manage it around our current roles as business leaders - it ends up fragmented and with insufficient follow up. Also makes it hard to get buy in from the team.
2. Managers not clear on their role. Staff not prioritising training
3. Individual-led initiatives or training wish-lists as there were too many barriers (but this would be ideal from a personnel point of view)
4. Training not relevant to everyone, at times we had people attend who didn't really need the training or it didn't apply to them
5. Coverage is always a problem. Not everyone is available at the same time
6. Staff leaving
7. Long online modules that don't engage or test competency

Q6 What kinds of support/resourcing – and from whom – could help you to develop and deliver the in-house training/capability initiatives you would ideally like to roll out?

1. Good question! The challenge is that I feel we need to download our ideas to someone who can take them on board, then expand / elaborate / refine based on what is already available, then package it up for us to start delivering. Helping us set clear milestones for an achievable roll out - sufficient to have value to the team, but not overstretch our existing resources. We are caught in the balance of needing to train, but also needing to deliver chargeable work. We have multiple company initiatives that already draw on "overhead" time - for wellbeing and cultural competency for example
2. Another L and D person. More staff in the business so they can dedicate more time to developing training projects
3. Money and direction from C-suite. Money to cover costs and clear expectations which help reduce other work priorities to allow training to fit into the work day
4. Ideally training from industry experts, or even better, in-house experts
5. Training on special topics that are relevant to us, but also useful to others. E.g. standards & rules
6. A budget from central government for training
7. Dedicated Environmental training role

Q7 How well do environment and sustainability training offers from professional associations, councils and other sources (please describe the latter sources) meet your professional training/capability needs?

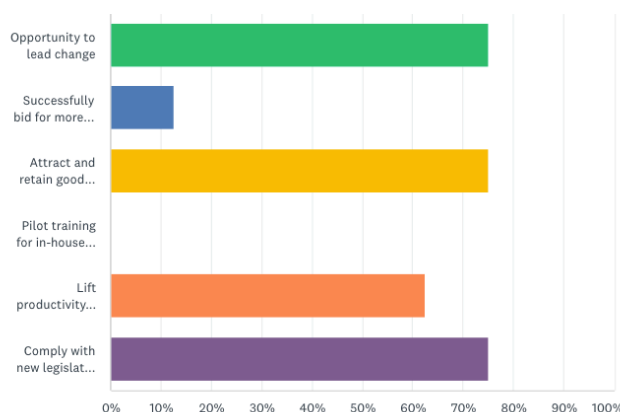
1. There are fabulous external courses available, but we don't have consistency in how they fit together and who would most benefit from them. We want to structure a programme of training that leans into both external and internal training.
2. I'm not sure on this one
3. I can always find courses I want to attend they just aren't always NZ-based
4. Not enough training available in the environment / sustainability space.
5. Some of it is good. Particularly from Water New Zealand

6. There is plenty of training available, both face to face and online: it's a question of time and availability of personnel.
7. Not well- usually online and more technical. Not suitable for training staff without an environmental background

Q8 What other comment, observations or questions do you have about getting out of our skills Catch-22 and growing our environmental capability and capacity?

1. It feels we are in a reactive space, so stretched for time that we are not able to proactively upskill staff and ourselves. While we know training will be invaluable - committing the time and budget to it remains a barrier. How to we tip the scales to truly see the value it can provide - far in excess of the time and monetary costs associated?
2. To break out of this there needs to be a period of pain. This could be financial by employing more resource or personnel by people working harder to get ahead. I know which I'd prefer but I can't see it being prioritised.
3. Can we please collectively give bosses a bit of a kick up the behind to make it clear that they need to make this a priority (not just lip service but outline exactly how it will work in their organisation and how it will be monitored/reported)
4. It would be useful to resurrect the industry training initiatives led by councils as part of their requirements to become approved practitioners etc e.g. the erosion and sediment control training courses carried out by ARC in its day.
5. Often it is about what gets priority and what funding is available
6. Just make a start, no matter how small.

Q9 What are your main motives for in-house training at this time? Please select all that apply:



Answer choices	%	Nō
Opportunity to lead change	75	6
Successfully bid for more interesting, important or remunerative work	12	1
Attract and retain good staff	75	6
Pilot training for in-house benefits and possible income from external training	0	0
Lift productivity by reducing the volume of rework, review and supervision	63	5
Comply with new legislative requirements	75	6

Other options and further comments:

1. We believe the way we operate is unique in many ways. Part of our challenge is we perhaps don't fully understand what the "secret sauce" is, nor how we acquired the skills we have as business leaders, which means we don't know how to share these skills with our team. This will take time to sit and brainstorm, and test, without certainty in outcome. Perhaps this is part of the reason we haven't prioritised the time... it is a complex environment all round!
2. To ensure people have a solid knowledge foundation to undertake the work they have been employed to do.

3. Energy and carbon management, when systemised, will result in both reductions in energy and GHG emissions, but will also reduce work load.
4. Be a leading organisation in this space and walk the talk of our policy

Other comments by two others who did not complete the survey:

- Whilst I'm not in a position to complete your survey, I do have a thought about this conundrum. Very often, a seeming impasse can only be resolved via an external stimulus. A silly example might be some third party applying for a sanity check on behalf of the pilot. More seriously, because (ultimately) the lack of training in organisations is very rarely time but **money** (or the willingness to obtain / spend it), perhaps the 'external stimulus' might be interest-free loans. These would be strictly regulated for use to enable and enact training. Terms of repayment would be similar to a Student Loan, only for organisations. There are mechanisms available for that type of arrangement, I believe. In my 10 years of consulting work with clients, I never once allowed them the excuse of, "Oh, we don't have time". Those organisations that insist on not training their people in necessary skills and functions either do not deserve to succeed or do not deserve your help. Divorce them and focus on those that genuinely want to make it happen!
- Your Catch22 sounds so familiar – I can relate to it as far back as the early 1990s when I was doing Environmental Audits for large infrastructure organisations as well as a few territorial councils. The main thing then was reorganisation being imposed on them and thereafter, from my perspective, it was loss of continuity with senior staff – each time I got to know someone they left or were moved on. It became so common that I just expected it and moved into other stuff.

14 respondents to a 2021 survey titled *What's the state of our environmental training?* observed that:

- the environment and sustainability field is extraordinarily broad, and a lot of environmental training is needed in different fields including climate change, energy, solid waste, biodiversity and biosecurity; and
- available training is not very well targeted and not very applied or practical. And to prepare more targeted training for our invaluable environmental professions already working in their diverse fields, there would need to be another layer of specificity in questions to tease the issue out.

More about Catch-22

Here's Joseph Heller's formulation of a Catch-22:

- If a pilot is deemed insane, they don't have to fly. To be deemed insane, a pilot must request to be evaluated. If a pilot requests to be evaluated, this demonstrates that he must be sane. Therefore, no pilot can ever be deemed insane, and no pilot can get out of flying. *Joseph Heller*

And here's a training equivalent:

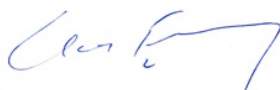
- The biggest inhibitor to putting a training program in place is the perception that it will take too much time. There is no investment you can make that will do more to improve productivity in your company. Being too busy to train is the moral equivalent of being too hungry to eat. *Ben Horowitz*

Sources

- Joseph Heller coined the term "Catch-22" in his 1961 novel of that name. Find out more at <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/simple-catch-22-examples.html>
- Ben Horowitz (2010) *Why It's Crucial To Train Your Employees*. An online article of 17 May 2010 viewable at <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/why-its-crucial-to-train-your-employees-2010-5#social> [originally accessed in 2010 and re-accessed on 21 September 2020].

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Ngā mihi nui from Clare Feeney