

### ***Assessment & Development Centres***

Assessment centres are selection tools used since 1942 and consist of a range of exercises designed to assess personal characteristics of candidates applying for a job. Development centres are a more recent phenomenon using the same sort of exercise design. Instead of assessing candidates for selection, they are designed to identify staff training and development needs. Development Centres are seen as (a) a strategy for ensuring that training and development plans are relevant to organisational needs, (b) a way of measuring the existing skill levels in the organisation and (c) a means to encourage people to take more responsibility for their own development.

### **Assessment Centres**

#### **A More Rounded View of Candidates**

Assessment centres can provide a rounded view of candidates abilities. An assessment centre allows candidates to perform on a range of simulations and exercises. The selection panel evaluates each candidate against the competencies, values and preferred working styles of the organisation. Although general mental ability is repeatedly shown to be the single best predictor of future work performance (supported by 85 years of research and approximately 1000 research studies) both job applicants and selection panels seem to have reservations about using ability tests as the main selection instrument. If assessment centre exercises are developed carefully they enhance the validity of the selection process by evaluating wider competencies.

#### **Competency Assessment**

Assessment centres involve job candidates undertaking a suite of exercises which simulate the activities carried out in the job. Individual performance on these exercises is used to measure the level of competency of each candidate in the areas the organisation has decided is important. These may be a mix task specific competencies (how they do the job), and context specific competencies (how they would fit with what is wanted in the wider organisation). The particular competencies used depend upon the target job eg relating to people, resistance to stress, planning and organising, motivation, adaptability and flexibility, problem solving, leadership, communication, decision making and initiative

#### **Assessment Centre Rules**

There are ten essential elements for an assessment centre:

1. it must be based on a job analysis
2. behavioural observations by the assessor must be classified into some meaningful and relevant categories (eg. competencies, aptitudes, dimensions)
3. techniques (exercises) must be designed to provide information for evaluating each competency or dimension
4. multiple assessment techniques must be used
5. assessment techniques must include sufficient job-related simulations in order to allow multiple opportunities to observe each candidates behaviour related to each competency or dimension

6. multiple assessors must observe the performance of each candidate
7. assessors must receive training in evaluation prior to participating in an assessment centre
8. assessors must systematically record specific behavioural observations at the time of their occurrence
9. assessors must prepare a report of each candidates performance in each exercise
10. the integration of behaviours must be based on a pooling of information or through a statistical integration process

(source: International Personnel Management Association: Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Centre Operations)

### **Assessment Centre Issues**

They are more expensive to develop than other selection tools. They can be time consuming and require staff (especially line managers) to take part as assessors. There is also some evidence that construct validity is low i.e. what is being measured by assessors is not always reliable – evaluations on the same construct (competency) measured across different exercises varies instead of being relatively stable.

### **How to Improve Assessment Centres**

1. have only a few conceptually distinct competencies so assessors can differentiate more clearly
2. provide concrete, job-related competency definitions to improve standardisation of evaluation between assessors
3. give frame-of-reference assessor training to establish consistent evaluation standards
4. ensure that there is cross-exercise assessment so that if there is variation in assessment on one construct for candidates it is identified and treated warily
5. ensure the assessment centre is designed by an experienced I/O psychologist
6. include an I/O psychologist on the assessment panel

## **Development Centres**

### **Effective Assessment of Development Needs**

Development centres are used to assess the training and development needs of staff. They are useful because they assess people in a structured way against the competencies identified by the organisation as being important for future organisational success. They are very effective at creating an alignment between individual development needs/training plans and the training needs of the organization. Development centres encourage greater awareness of changing organisational priorities and refocus both individual and organisational development. They encourage a high self-awareness of current skills/abilities and can also emphasise self-management of personal development and career planning.

### **Identifying Development Needs**

Development centres follow a similar format as assessment centres - a suite of exercises designed to assess a set of defined competencies. In addition they usually involve self-assessment and sometimes 360-degree assessment (peers/supervisors/customers/direct reports) on the identified competencies. They do not have a pass/fail criteria but instead are geared towards developing the individual. They focus on potential and address a longer term

need. The development centre identifies participant skill level on the important organisational competencies. The development centre also compares individual's self-awareness of skills with the ratings from the assessment panel. The development centre provides information to enable focussed training plans to be developed. It also provides an opportunity for individualised coaching where there is a misalignment between self-awareness and assessed skills.

### **Rules for Development Centres**

There are some general rules for development centres.

1. They should be designed and managed by an experienced I/O psychologist
2. There are substantial pre-centre and post-centre briefings of participants
3. They use assessors unknown to participants (and therefore considered to be unbiased) – not direct line managers
4. They have a higher ratio of assessor to participant (than assessment centres)
5. There is a greater emphasis on self assessment
6. They involve the individual having control over the information obtained and developing training and development plans based on this information

### **Development Centre Issues**

There is not a large body of research on development centres. However, the issues raised to date relate to ways of giving feedback that respondents will act upon and whether development centres can assist in making people more self-aware of their abilities. Research has consistently shown that a significant proportion of people tend to over-rate their abilities whilst a lesser number either under-rate or accurately rate their abilities. There is a tendency to maintain this perception despite participation in a development centre. This indicates that we need to think more carefully and critically about the way feedback is provided in Development Centres.

### **How to Improve Development Centres**

1. have only a few conceptually distinct constructs so assessors can differentiate clearly
2. give frame-of-reference assessor training to establish consistent evaluation standards
3. incorporate self assessment into the Development Centre – pre and post Centre
4. consider combining a 360 degree feedback tool with the Development Centre
5. use a structured approach to giving feedback eg. over-raters – more concrete and objective; under-raters – concentrating on positive feedback and self-esteem issues
6. incorporate goal setting approaches into development plans
7. where possible align development plans with performance management performance indicators

Disclaimer: The information in this report is provided in good faith and we believe it to be accurate and correct. However, any decision you may take on the basis of this information must be your own responsibility.