

# How to....Assess candidates

## Introduction

Research into the merits of different assessment tools tends to focus on the extent to which a given tool is a good predictor of subsequent performance in the job. Studies demonstrate quite consistently that the use of interviews alone as a means of assessing candidates tends to be a poor predictor of subsequent success in the post. Certain types of interview are even worse as predictors.

The assessment method that is the best predictor of subsequent success in the post is the assessment centre approach. For a post that is critical in achieving key objectives and/or for posts of Grade 7/8 or above, managers involved in recruitment and selection would be well advised to consider the use of assessment centre techniques.

An assessment centre involves the use of a number of individual assessment techniques in order to produce a final assessment of candidates. This guide provides advice on a number of techniques commonly used in assessment centres. They can be combined in various ways to suit particular job vacancies, in order to produce more accurate assessment of candidates.

## Interviews

- Interview questions should be planned carefully before the interview
- The questions should focus on the attributes and behaviours needed to succeed in the job - i.e. the ones previously included in the person specification. Thus there will be a number of topics that will need to be explored with all candidates.
- All candidates should be asked the same opening question for each of the topics. Thereafter, supplementary, probing, questions should be asked to enable the interviewer to obtain the evidence they need of the candidate's capability.
- Answers should be scored according to an agreed rating system.

## Presentations

- Presentations should only be used in assessing applicants where presentation skills are required in the job. Typically applicants are given a subject before the day, enabling them to prepare the presentation. A presentation may be 10 minutes, followed by 10 minutes question and answer.
- The presentation may be given solely to the interview panel or the audience may be a broader one- for example existing members of staff from the department. In the former case, the presentation typically takes place just before the formal interview; in the latter it is usually a separate event.
- As the assessment criteria for the presentation should be agreed in advance, the audience might not include the members of the interview panel.
- In such a case, the assessments would be forwarded to the selection panel in time for its final deliberations.

## Work Sample Tests

- These tests involve the applicant undertaking a task - or tasks - representative of the content of the job itself.
- Work sample tests may focus on technical skills, such as the use of a particular software package.
- Tests of non-technical skills are also an option. An example is the in tray exercise, where the applicant is asked to read a range of documents related to the role (e.g. emails, notes, telephone messages, memos, letters) in a limited time and state what action they would take on each and in which order.
- When the test has been scored, the results are given to the interview panel for possible follow up in the interview.

## Group Exercises

- These are particularly useful in assessing interpersonal competence.
- Clear assessment criteria should be established in advance, drawn from the person specification. Criteria might include persuasiveness, flexibility or drive for example.
- Four or five applicants are given a task to complete within a time limit, but left to decide for themselves how the task is to be tackled and who is to do what. The task should be designed *to test competencies that are required in the job*.
- The choice of task is of little relevance. It may be work-related but need not be: the interaction between candidates and the assessment of each candidate's interpersonal competence are the key factors. Hence the balloon debate<sup>[2]</sup> is probably the classic (if dated) example of a group exercise used in assessing candidates.
- Assessors, who may not be members of the interview panel, need to be trained and a rating scale developed. Again the assessments would be forwarded to the selection panel in time for follow up in the interview or in its final deliberations.

## Ability Tests

- There are two broad categories of ability (or aptitude) tests used in recruitment. The first category includes tests of mental or cognitive ability such as numerical and verbal reasoning tests and general intelligence (IQ) tests. The second is tests of job-related abilities, such as tests of manual dexterity or clerical ability.
- Many employers use these tests to weed out the poorest candidates rather than to differentiate between those considered appointable. For example, employers with large graduate schemes use online testing at an early stage in the application process in order to whittle down the number of applicants.
- Hiring Managers should discuss the suitability of these tests with their Resourcing Adviser as early as possible. Although these tests can be very useful for reducing a large field of candidates and can be useful for assessing a certain skill (e.g. coding for an IT role) you should consider the following points carefully:

- If you are using an external provider there may be a cost involved, which would need to be covered by your departmental budget.
- Are the tests relevant to the essential and desirable criteria for the post?
- If the testing will be carried out during the interview process, who will be responsible for arranging this?
- Who will be involved in assessing the answers, and how will they be trained?
- When will the assessment be carried out and how will you decide what the scoring cut-off point will be?
- How will you feedback to unsuccessful candidates?

## **Personality Tests**

- Not all personality tests are suitable for use in recruitment. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator is a widely-used personality questionnaire that is not suitable for use in recruitment for example.
- Personality tests used in assessing applicants for jobs are typically taken online in advance of an interview/assessment day. A report is generated automatically for the use of the assessors.
- The report profiles an applicant's strengths, compared to a norm group, in a number of areas. These areas might include evaluating problems, building relationships and driving success.
- The report is intended to open up lines of enquiry for the interview, for example where an applicant has a low score on one of the areas.
- The interviewer's report includes targeted interview questions to assist the interviewer in exploring the applicant's strengths further.
- The applicant typically receives a summary profile of the questionnaire results, generated automatically.
- An example of Saville Consulting's Wave Focus Styles interviewer's report can be viewed [here](#).
- The results of personality tests need to be handled with care to ensure that they are used fairly and that good practice in Equality and Diversity is not infringed. Further advice on the use of personality tests in recruitment is available from The Resourcing Manager.

## **Assessment Centres**

Assessment centres feature a combination of the methods outlined above, appropriate to the role. By providing a greater quantity of data on applicants- gathered in a variety of situations by a variety of assessors- more balanced assessments can be made of applicants.

This underpins the more accurate predictions of job success associated with assessment centres. Where 1.0 represents perfect prediction, interviews have an accuracy of a little over 0.3. Personality tests, ability tests and work sample tests have accuracies between 0.4 and 0.6. Assessment centres, combining many or all of these individual elements, have an accuracy approaching 0.8.[1]

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[1] Smith, M, Gregg, M and Andrews, D: *Selection and Assessment: a new appraisal*, London: Pitman 1989. Cited in Taylor, S: *People Resourcing*, London: CIPD 2008

[2] The typical example of a balloon debate is that of a hot air balloon which is losing height rapidly and will soon crash because it is overweight, therefore the candidates brief may include the need to get rid of some of the passengers, in order to save the lives of the majority, and to discuss/justify how to do this. This type of exercise tests decision making, analytical reasoning skills and the ability to put forward a persuasive case - all important management skills. In a real life selection centre candidates would be given about 30 minutes to study the problem and to produce recommendations for action and the reasons behind their decision. This could be a group exercise with other candidates but could also be given as an individual exercise in which the candidates had to produce a report.