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Pg.10

Face to Face

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ASSESSMENT CENTERS

Pg.16



“Assessment Center” (AC) is defined here as a ‘...method or process of assessing aptitude, skills, personality characteristics and performance; applied to an individual or a group of participants by trained assessors using various aptitude diagnostic tools and processes in order to obtain information about applicants' abilities or development potential.’ In keeping with this definition an attempt has been made to introduce the readers to the basic concepts, methods and tools of AC by briefly describing some of these tools in a very general introductory exposition. That means, the article is addressed to novices and to those students, managers and psychologists who are interested in getting a quick view of AC. If experts also find it somewhat useful the authors will treat their effort worthwhile.



Assessment Centers



COVER Feature

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SOMA RANJAN*



A mother and a baby camel were lazing around and suddenly the baby camel asked...Baby: Mother, mother may I ask you some questions?

Mother: Sure! Why son is there something bothering you?

Baby: Why do camels have humps?

Mother: Well, son, we are desert animals, we need the humps to store water and we are known to survive without water

Baby: Okay, then why are our legs long and our feet rounded?

Mother: Son, obviously they are meant for walking in the desert, you know with these legs I can move around the desert better than anyone does! Said the mother proudly

Baby: Okay, then why are our eyelashes long? Sometimes they bother my sight

Mother: My son, those long thick eyelashes are your protective cover. They help to protect your eyes from the desert sand and wind. Said mother camel with eyes rimming with pride.....

Baby: I see. So the hump is to store water when we are in the desert, the legs are for walking through the desert and these eyelashes protect my eyes from the desert. Then, Mom! What the hell are we doing here in the zzzooooooooo!

Has the question- "Where are you right now? Ever occurred to you?" The answer lies in the MORAL OF THE STORY. Which is: "Skills, knowledge, abilities and experiences are only useful if you and your employer are at the right fit and you are at the right place/job".





The jet airways was late and the team missed the connecting train to the Assessment site. The company being particular about the assessment schedule arranged for the team's travel to the site by their special company's private 10 seater plane. All the team members were extremely happy as none of them had ever travelled by small plane in their past.

Assessment Center is the most scientific way to satisfy the needs of both the employers as well the employees. The present article shades some light on the process of this methodology.

It was between the world wars that the German Army developed the forerunner of the modern assessment process now known as Assessment Centre. A German psychologist Dr. Simoneit's (1940) work formed the foundation of the Assessment Centers. Morgan (1955) describes how Simoneit how the officers were rated on how well they performed and chosen for promotion accordingly for a variety of tasks and exercises. Simoneit concluded that a successful officer needed to show four qualities as (i) Leadership, (ii) Adaptability to different situations, (iii) Ability to find a solution to a problem, and (iv) Ability to work as team member. Next to the Germans, the British government created the Assessment Board for Selection and the American Intelligence added further psychological tests and more exercises to create their own assessment processes. Their basic approach remained similar in all sectors even today including those in the Indian army.

Now a days, worldwide, two-thirds of employers using assessment centres include them as part of their graduate recruitment programmes or when selecting middle or senior managers mainly because ACs are seen as one of the most effective ways of identifying top candidates who'll get on well with others and fit in with the organisation's culture. For example, in a recent survey by Employment Review more than nine out of ten employers using assessment centres (AC) believed that AC is 'very effective' means of selecting staff. In India, however, it has just started catching the fancy of the Indian managers mainly because of the initiatives taken by HR managers in the MNCs operating in this country. That means, as things are catching on in this country, students and others are most likely to face an Assessment Centre at some points of their career. These critical pints could be any of the following:

1. As a graduate (or MBA, BE) applying for their first job.
2. When moving from a supervisory role to a management role (promotion).



3. As part of your annual appraisal review (i.e., as part of your company's reward system).

The expense for a company for conducting an assessment centre is usually somewhere between Rs.2000 and 35,000 per candidate depending upon who the assessors are and how much time are spent on it. A company having enough money to spend on brand name particularly the MNCs consultants' from UK or USA like Hey, McKenzie, KPMG or Deloitte may have to spend 25000+ per candidate. The assessment centre methods are utilized in a variety of settings including industry and business, government, armed forces, educational institutions, and safety forces to select individuals for supervisory, technical, sales, or management positions, major financial institutions or management consultancies. Now, even Government of India is getting involved in such exercises.

The term 'ASSESSMENT CENTER' refers to a process. The present author defines the term as "...a method or process of assessing aptitude, skills, personality characteristics and performance; applied to an individual or a group of individuals (participants) by trained assessors using various diagnostic tools and processes in order to obtain information about applicants' abilities or development potential." AC focuses on a set of varied exercises, which are designed to simulate different aspects of the work environment. The evaluation results of these tests must closely match behaviours required for the role for which the assessment has been carried out.

AC Process

Since a large amount of time and expense are involved in conducting AC they are usually used after the initial stages of the selection process like initial screening. Other measurement tools such as psychological tests complement the selection process which is often used as a part of most AC.

The AC process runs something like the following diagram:

Figure – 1: Assessment Centre Process



ACs are considered to be the fairest and most accurate method of selecting staff particularly because a number of different

selectors / assessors involved in the process over a longer period of time. They have the chance to see (a) What candidate can do (b) How he/she reacts to situations and (c) How she relates to others in a variety of situations which emulate her future role(s). At the end of the process, the assessors will select some candidates who will be invited for a final interview based on their scores. The process may last from half-a-day to two full days depending on the level or position for which the candidates are being assessed. Salahkaar Consultants normally do either one day or two days' exercise except for very lower level of employees like technicians. However, in all of these cases the process itself is very similar. In general, there are two types of assessment centre. They have been briefly described below.

(i) The Assessment Centre Meant for Selection of Fresh Graduates

It is generally used by top-flight management consultants and they call it Elite Assessment Centres. Examples are Fortune 100 companies and the most prestigious US, British or German Government agencies where the starting salaries are very attractive and the training programmes and work opportunities offered are invariably world-class. Surprisingly, companies like Hey, KPMG, McKinsey or Deloitte or Deutsche Bank use this method internationally but not in India for their own selection. In India, being a product of a premium institute is enough. They recruit exclusively from top universities and B-schools like IIMs.

(ii) The Management Assessment Centre

In the management assessment centre candidates will have significant full-time work experience. Some may be graduates, some may not, but all of them will be looking to take a step up in their level of responsibility like a promotion from the present role to a higher one or may be aspiring to get a better salary. In all such cases, the AC process is trying to determine whether candidates can demonstrate competencies at the next level up or not.

QUALIFICATION OF AN ASSESSOR

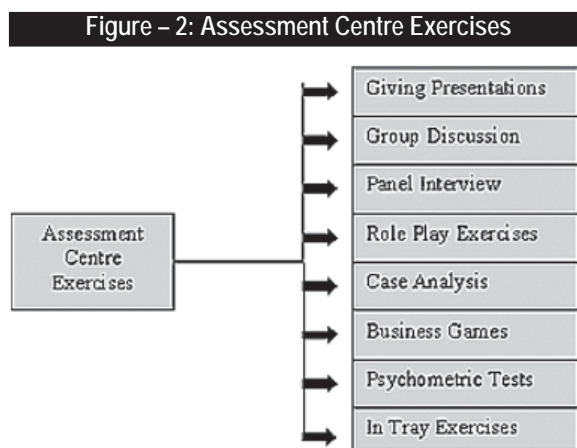
Tina Lewis Rowe (2006) has defined an assessor as "...an individual trained to observe record, classify and make reliable judgments about the behaviours of those being assessed." The assessors are usually people who are senior in hierarchy relative to the position they are going to assess for. These people will have a very clear idea of the qualities they expect to see in an individual performing the role for which they are assessing.



There may also be expert assessors from well known consulting firm. Salahkaar Consultants is one such company which has identified a respectable list of assessors from different fields of expertise with at least 5 years of experience as assessors. It has a continuous process of identifying and listing of experts as their associate assessors and consultants. They also train and certify assessors for Psychometrics, Competency Mapping and Assessment and Development Centers.

EXERCISES AND TOOLS USED FOR AC

Figure-2 below shows the most common types of exercises.



PSYCHOMETRIC/APTITUDE TESTS

Most organisations include psychological or psychometric tests within their assessment centres and these will be marked in the usual way and not by the assessors as they do not reflect competencies. These tests typically include (a) Verbal reasoning, (b) Numerical reasoning, and (c) Abstract reasoning and (d) some personality tests. In India, 16pf and MBTI™ are more popular. We at Salahkaar Consultants often use 16pf, MBTI™, FIRO-B, Salahkaar Occupational Profile, Executive Initiative Scale, Enneagram, EQiit™ and Thinking Style tests. We also use some psychomotor tests like finger dexterity test, eye-hand co-ordination tests, etc., for the selection of manual labour, technicians, apprentices, etc. Salahkaar does not normally use any of the Reasoning tests for senior level managerial selection.

It is notable from psychometric point of view that many Western as well Indian testing companies in India use tests of which psychometric properties are not well known. These companies do not disclose the scientific validity and reliabilities of their tests in

the name of confidentiality. They would not allow even highly placed Psychometrician to examine their test. Since they are not available in the market there is no way to ascertain their psychometric properties by any independent agency. It is essential that people being tested should be normed against the right peer group, otherwise their characteristics, which would appear average against their appropriate norm, would be exaggerated in the basic norm. The same logic applies to OPQ, 16pf (Vth Edition) and more so with MBTI. None of the publishers of these popular tests including 16pf (Vth Ed.), MBTI, Thomas Profiling, OPQ etc. have made known their adequacy about the reliability or validity of their tests in the Indian situations. To the best of the knowledge of the present author none of them have been tested for their reliability and validity in the Indian population by any independent agency. Unfortunately there are few psychologists working in this field capable of educating the average Indian managers about the fallacy of these tests in the Indian population. To top it many managers are not even aware that psychologists have anything to do with psychometrics.

IN-TRAY OR IN-BASKET EXERCISE

The in-tray exercise forms the back-bone of any assessment centre and this is because of the diversity of behaviours as well as, Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KAS's) that can be tested as part of this exercise. For example, the main behaviours that a candidate will need to demonstrate in this exercise could be: • Planning, • Prioritization, • Decision making, • Management style, • Evaluation of situations, • Analysis of information, • Speed & Accuracy, • Effective use of Time and Leadership, etc. As example of In-tray exercises used by Salahkaar Consultants will normally have between 12-24 in-tray items, which candidates have to priorities and say how they take action by answering a series of 15-30 multiple choice questions. Salahkaar Consultants have developed In-tray exercises of various difficulty levels for different categories of employees.

PRESENTATION EXERCISE

The most obvious purpose of this exercise is to measure such competencies as the ability to communicate a message in a clear and persuasive way. This may cover three separate areas 1. How you organize the material, 2. How you actually present it, and 3. How you handle and answer questions.

GROUP EXERCISES

Group exercises are used to assess how the candidate



Potential Problems and their Possible Solution in Running Successful Assessment Center

Any number of events, conditions, and situations could potentially derail the whole process and plan to run an assessment centre successfully. Some circumstances are predictable - others are not. Advanced planning for the likely obstacles will lessen their impact should they occur and also help to minimize the impact of any unforeseen events that arise.

Once goal and standards are defined do the following:

- 1) Determine what steps need to be taken to attain them and
- 2) Brainstorm to arrive at what problems are most likely to occur during implementation.

The most likely problem areas could be:

Time – Regular work, other obligations, changing priorities, short time available (for example, "... this has to be completed before March." And this is already January.

Control – Influence of key stakeholders, competing goals and expectations of different individuals (the project manager may want to "examine" your tools and he is a candidates to be assessed).

Power and politics – Influence of the formal and informal groups, organizational policy and

procedures, interested parties (workers' union or officers' association might be apprehensive and, hence, may oppose the move for assessment).

Resources – Availability of people and money (Every one is convinced about the usefulness but company may not have enough resources and budget).

Resistance – Stemming from conflicting goals, comfort with the status quo (it is possible that the management might have done something similar on an earlier occasion without any result and now people feel it as waste of time).

Skill – People's ability to perform the tasks in a high quality manner is limited (for example, limited for your tools).

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HANDLE PROBLEMS?

To conduct your potential problem analysis, review each action step in the assessment cycle and the plan as a whole, and ask, "What could go wrong here? Where? What? How? And Why?" As the list of potential problems could be quite long, it will benefit from some focus. Therefore, assess each potential problem in terms of its probability and its likely impact. Make it your first priority to develop preventive and contingent action plans for the potential problems with the highest probability and impact. If time permits, you may then wish to

develop actions for those that are less critical. Before determining the appropriate actions to address these obstacles, you must first identify the likely causes of each of your high priority potential problems. With this information, you can better direct preventive action toward eliminating or limiting the likely cause(s). You may find that modifying the original plan - adding or changing action steps, reassessing accountabilities, or changing completion dates will lessen the likelihood of a problem occurring.

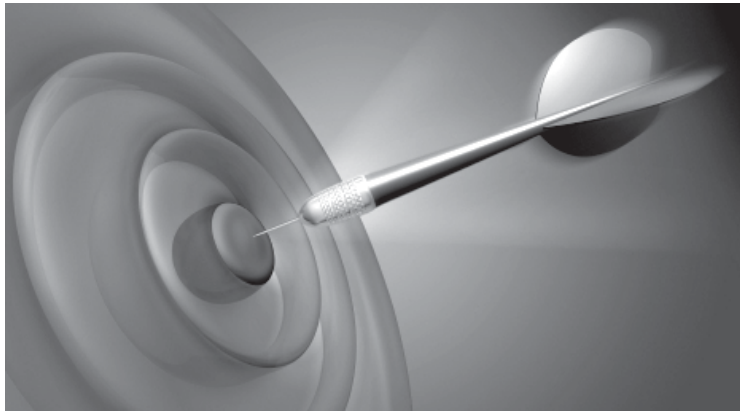
As a final step in the planning process, develop contingency actions to address any problems that might occur despite your efforts to prevent them. This step will help you to quickly and efficiently resolve these circumstances rather than merely react to them haphazardly.

Once you have modified your original implementation plan to take into account potential problems and preventive measures (as well as the preparation of contingency actions should they be necessary), you have a game plan for implementation. This reality based document should equip you to deal with almost every eventuality that might arise. It will also serve to provide people outside the project team with step-by-step information about the development process.

• Chitranjan N. Daftuar



interacts with others and to gauge his/her impact and influence when working in a team. Typically, she will be given a problem or scenario which requires a collective decision to be taken. The exercise may also require the candidates to demonstrate: planning, organizing and strategic thinking skills. There are three basic formats of group exercise that can be used at an Assessment Centre. They are: (i) Free Format: The structure of the group is left entirely to the group itself to work out like in a Leader less group work; (ii) Partially Structured Format: Each candidate is given a specific task or role on which he must lead the discussion; (iii) Structured Group work: A role is assigned to each member of the group and on which they perform during this exercise. The type of scenario used in group exercises may



vary from physical problems, for example: how to build a bridge over a stream using materials provided, to purely theoretical problems which can be solved by discussion. The main themes of a 'Group Discussion' exercise often take one of the following forms: (a) Critical Incident, (b) Organisational Issue and (c) Problem Solving & Simulation Exercises.

ROLE PLAY EXERCISES

The role-plays allow the assessors to actually test how candidates respond when put on the spot or dealing with conflict. The key purpose of the exercise is (again) to see what competencies she displays and how her behaviour matches those of the required role. This is one of the most popular exercises these days. The most popular behaviours assessors would generally be looking for in this exercise are Verbal Communications, Planning & Adaptability, Decision Making, Evaluation & Analysis, Mentoring & Coaching, Ability to act as Change Agent, Customer Orientation, etc.

CASE ANALYSIS EXERCISE

A case study is one of several ways of understanding an issue. It is an in-depth investigation/study of a single individual, group, incident, or community or a company's problem. Case study methods involve an in-depth, longitudinal examination of a single instance or event: a case. They provide a systematic way of looking at events, collecting information and data for reporting the results. The length, difficulty level and complexity of a case depends upon the level of the participants and or the level of candidates' quality that is sought to be evaluated.

MEDIA INTERVIEW EXERCISE

This specialized exercise is rarely used, except in assessment center designed to select for senior management position like a Finance Director where the candidate may have to perform a kind of a unique role to deal with the press and other public media.

COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEWS/ BEHAVIOURAL EVENT INTERVIEWS (BEI).

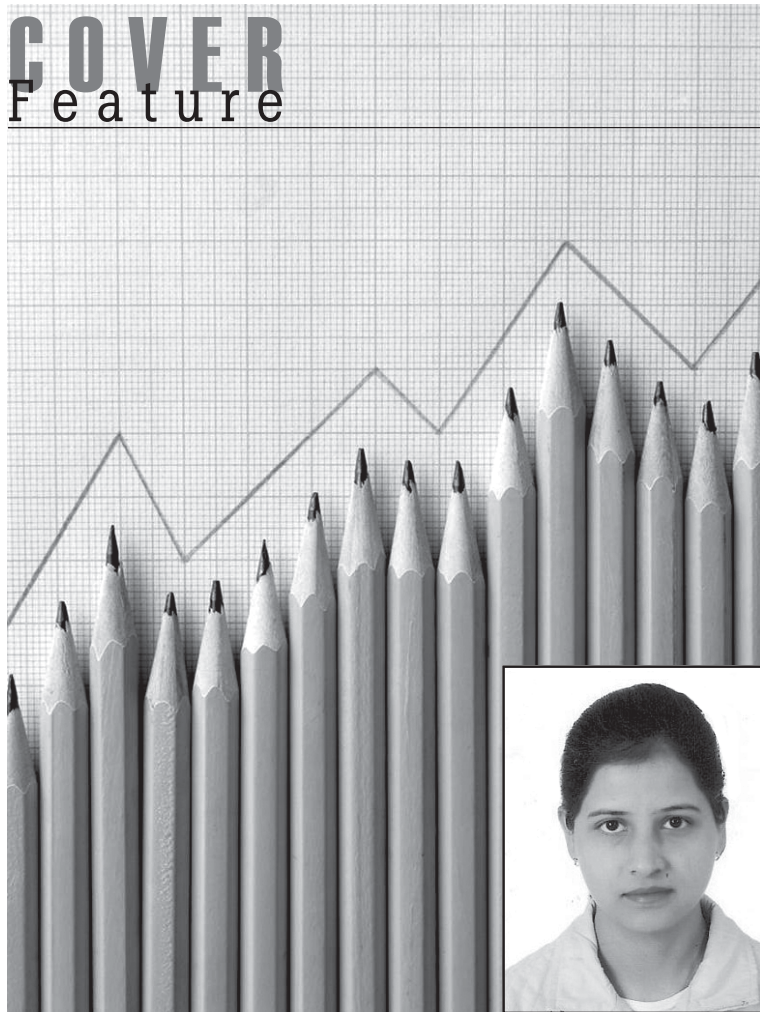
Some competencies cannot easily be demonstrated in exercises and the only opportunity to 'demonstrate' them will be with reference to qualifications, employment history or personal achievements. That is the reason that almost all assessment centers retain some sort of interview component, usually a competency-based interview. More popular name for this technique now a day is BEI. The assumption being that the best indication of an individual's future behaviour is his/her past performance (Daftuar, 1981).

CONCLUDING NOTE

The above note is a very general short introductory exposition on a method of selection which is now considered as the most scientific and effective tool of personnel selection. I have addressed this article to novices and to those managers and psychologists who are interested in getting a quick view of the scene of AC methodologies within a small window frame.

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Holistic Assessment & Assessment Cycle



Lucky Anand

Organizations and the HR professionals emphasize greatly on the importance of choosing the right candidate for all purposes, be it for hiring or for promotion or transfer. Do they also spend the same level of energy on really selecting the right fit?

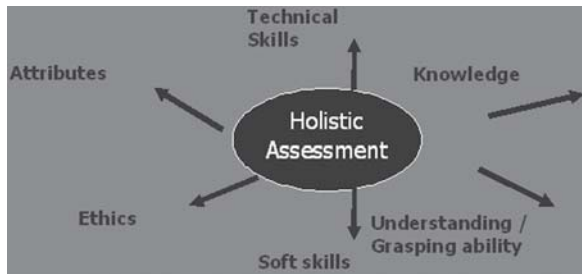
There are very few organizations that diligently perform the rigorous exercise to find out the right fit for any role. Some organizations that do the assessment of right fit do it through the Assessment Centre technique. However, there are very few organizations that use it for all purposes like hiring, promotion, training, etc. at all levels. Some use Assessment Centres in order to fill the requirements only for certain key positions. Some organizations use it only for hiring. Some use it for succession planning. Some use it for restructuring. And so on.

Assessment Centers can actually be very effective if done holistically for all HR processes. The data can be used as a common source for hiring, development, succession planning, etc. The variety of tests / assessment tools used in an Assessment Centre makes it a robust technique that can help in judging and selecting the candidates with the right blend of skills, knowledge and attitudes as per the need.

Taking up a holistic approach in Assessment can really be helpful in building a rich database of individuals in the organization for practically all purposes.

What is a holistic assessment?

A holistic assessment is the integrated approach to the complete and thorough check of the present and potential capabilities of a prospective candidate. In medical terms, a holistic assessment includes a thorough check



up. Just as a thorough medical check-up gives a complete report about all the vital organs of an individual a holistic assessment in HR means a thorough assessment of the cognitive ability, skills, attributes, attitude and behavior of an individual.

Assessments are done by organizations in different ways and not necessarily a holistic approach is taken all the time. Generally any two or three areas are considered for assessment. For senior management, generally, the leadership qualities / soft skills are the focus areas while assessing individuals. For entry level employees, more emphasis happens to be on the Grasping ability and attitude. How comprehensive picture of the new joiners at entry level would have been if these were judged on the soft skills, knowledge etc. This holistic report can help not only in the right placement but in charting out the career graph, identifying learning needs, etc.

As shown in the figure above, the complete assessment of individuals consists of test of his knowledge, skills, attributes, grasping ability, ethics and his soft skills, etc., which could be specific to the present or future job requirements.

The purpose of the assessment is to judge competence on the basis of performance against the performance criteria set out under each element of competency. A typical assessment centre consists of a variety of specially designed exercises. These exercises are simulations related to actual work situations.

The Assessment Cycle

A typical assessment cycle consists of several phases.

1. Plan the assessment

The identified purpose of assessment based on the overall organization level goals provides the ground work for the planning of assessment.

The planning stage is a very important phase. It includes identification of need and purpose for conducting assessment.

The purpose gives the direction. Thus the purpose of assessment provides the key areas to be assessed. The benchmark, the desired levels and gap analysis criteria are provided by the purpose. Based on these, the tools are decided and the rating / assessment criteria are determined.

2. Prepare the candidate

Once the plan is finalized, the next step is to prepare the candidates. This is a challenging step in terms of sensitivity it involves. In case of assessment for promotions, the communication and the preparation of candidate is to be managed circumspectly. It brief, this step involves building a high level of rapport between the assessors and the candidates.

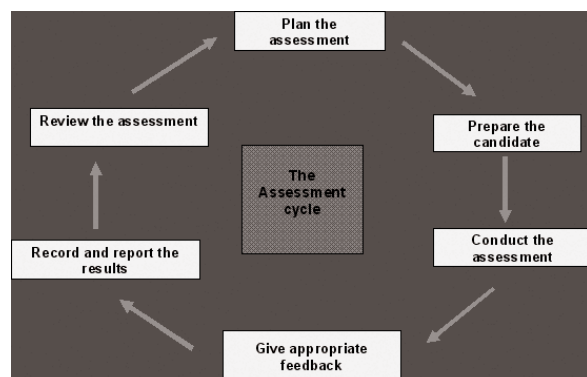
3. Conduct the Assessment

Conducting the an assessment centre process itself includes certain typical steps like choosing the right instruments, administering the tools/instruments scoring them, interpreting the result, writing report and recommendations.

Instruments chosen are generally simulations of the actual work situations which candidates will be expected to perform on his real life work/tasks. The assessors present during the session assess these candidates as per the predesigned judgment criteria.

4. Give appropriate feedback

After the assessments are complete a full scale friendly feedback is session is due. In such a feedback session the assessor and the assessee meet one-to-one with each other and the assessor tries to clear all the doubts and reservation the assessee may have about the various issues like methodology, findings, conclusions, recommendations etc.





Assessment centre process

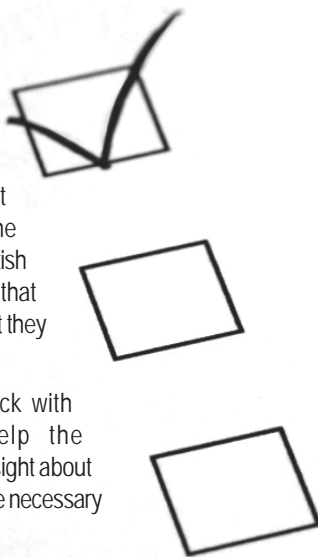
- ◆ Identification and definition of the strategic purpose of the “centre”
- ◆ Analysis of the target job or capability level to define the required competencies and skills for success
- ◆ Design of appropriate materials (eg simulation exercises) to collect evidence against criteria
- ◆ Training of assessors to use assessment materials
- ◆ Communication with the participants to inform them of what to expect
- ◆ A concluding, structured consolidation analysis and discussion (final decision-making process) to identify summary performance and capability for each individual
- ◆ Structured, consistently delivered feedback to the participant on that performance
- ◆ Review of the ‘performance’ of the assessment process in delivering against the strategic needs identified at the beginning.

Source: ITAP International

In such a meeting all precautions and safeguards that are normally taken in a feedback session are taken.

While giving feedback it would be wise to remember the famous maxim of the famous British author W. Somerset Maugham that “people ask you for criticism, but they only want praise”.

So provide such feedback with encouragement which help the participants gain some good insight about themselves and provide them the necessary motivation.



5. Record and report the results

It is very important to close the cycle with the management as well as with the candidate by providing relevant feedback and report to the management. Based on the judgment of the assessors, a detailed report with respect to the predefined criteria should be presented to the management.

6. Review the assessment

We talked about the purpose in the beginning of the cycle.

This purpose helps in the review of the assessment, its tools, the process, the predefined criteria, etc. That means like any effort of this magnitude must end with the results which satisfies the objectives for which it was initiated in the first place.

Such a report and review has an added advantage: the results of the same can be used during the start of the next assessment cycle and fine-tuning the overall approach in future assessments.



Role-play as vital tool in Assessment Center

Rajni Verma, HR Executive, Pune



Assessment Centers have an appreciable bequest in process of recruitment and selection of employees in most of the organizations. They are deemed as one of the most effective way to get an absolute view of potential job candidates. Assessments in selection, development and appraisal are the inputs which used to predict outputs. Inputs given by candidate can be new and undetected when undergoes certain exercises like role-play.

Basically, role-play is one of the most popular exercises in an Assessment Center and commonly utilized method to evaluate social skill implementation for any kind of situation. Here, assessors may come across the competencies which were hidden during other exercises. This type of exercise helps assessors to test how candidate react to a particular and immediate situations. Role play is often used as a technique of gathering perceptions of candidate(s) into a practical experience.

How it goes?

In this (role-play) exercise, participants will play roles where scenarios are based on the sort of situations matching with a real life confrontation in an organization which contain two or more different viewpoints or perspectives. The situations will be realistic and relevant to the role players. Each participant will have a particular objective(s) which need to be fulfilled and may well be in conflict with their fellow role player(s). Assessors usually take one-to-one (The one to one format in role play is normal but not a strict rule. If situation demands there could be role plays involving more than one role players.) format to observe the interactions between participants where they try to explore few of the following competencies from individuals.

- Verbal communication
- Problem solving and Analysis
- Coaching and Directing others
- Negotiation and influencing
- Decision making
- Motivating
- Adaptability



Below are few examples which can be considered as a platform while designing a role-play exercise:

- Negotiating on a contract/project
- Handling a difficult customer.
- Meeting to discuss any disciplinary action on an employee

Assessor(s) may ask question(s) to the candidate afterwards to find out more about more clear view (or another view) of his tactic, direction and effective outcomes of the interactions.

Concise of Role-play

A capable exercise like Role-play can become unproductive and ineffective if participants are uncertain on what they are supposed to do. The brief of the role play should be instantly recognizable and fully in accordance with the purpose. Prior to that, while deciding on a situation to consider it as a role-play, a clear view of the purpose has to be taken in consideration. A well written brief will help to keep the role play focused and on track. Adequate preparation time may seem obvious, but it is often unnoticed in the confidence that it is best to get on with it. People

can be encouraged to share what they are trying to achieve with observers, so it becomes a shared, facilitative exercise rather than a battle - this will also defuse fear and tension. Again, sharing intention will assist and not ruin the role play.

Advantages of Role-play exercise

Role-play exercises have several advantages when it is used for selection and development. In particular these exercises:

- Allow observation of interpersonal /social skills of a prospective candidate
- Are pragmatic in approach, especially for managerial tasks.
- Can be customized to suit a range of tasks and circumstances that successful candidate are likely to encounter.

Timing for Role-play

Candidate should be allotted with time duration of 10 -15 minutes to understand the circumstances and to prepare for the exercise. After that, assessor(s) can instruct candidates to start with the exercise. Usually time duration for playing the exercise will depend on the circumstance/scenario which is to be discussed/acted but it should not be stretched for more than 25 minutes normally.

Rules for the Role-play

There are no hard core rules for this exercise but still few things must be considered for the exercise:

1. Focus of exercise should be precise.
2. Objectives and instructions must be clear and understandable.
3. Feedback needs to be distinct, significant, and sensible and should be given immediately.
4. Behaviors which are difficult to learn and develop should be avoided.

Also, we can allow other participants to observe the role play and give their comments afterwards. Observers' comments are hugely beneficial to the participants' learning.

At the end of the role-play session, participants will often come up to share their experience mentioning that they found this session as one of the most powerful way of learning they have ever practiced or the reverse or as they actually might have experienced.