Strategies for the Design and Administration of Assessment Center Technology: A Case Study for the Selection and Development of Employees

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Abstract
Selection and development of employees are important activities for human resource professionals and managers in today’s global economy. In the American business environment, we are dealing with many different and diverse generations, each having unique wants, needs, goals, aspirations, strengths, and weaknesses. The careful selection and development of employees is of paramount concern to business leaders around the world, and it is becoming more critical due to the cost of making a wrong decision. Research shows that it can cost up to two and a half times the position salary to make a wrong decision. This places additional responsibility on Human Resource Management (HRM) in developing strategies and techniques for the selection and development of the best possible talent in today’s internal and external aspiring applicants and candidates. These techniques are described as assessment centers. This paper is a reflection of well documented assessment center history, contemporary research, and the adoption of the assessment center methodology in organizations that choose to develop their own program, methodology and suggestions for center managers in the design process.

Keywords: Assessment centers, assessment center technology, employee selection, and employee development.

Introduction to Assessment Centers

Assessment center technologies tend to describe the “system by which information, gathered under controlled conditions – in which people are required to perform job-related tasks—is used to select, develop, council, career plan and any other activity which would enhance the fit of
the person and the position and the overall effectiveness of the organization” (Jaffee and Sefcil, 1980, pp. 40-3). This paper’s reflection, based on the authors’ experiences for several major industrial American organizations, helps businesses today in the design, development and administration of assessment centers. The authors have reviewed a great deal of research on the development of the process, standardized techniques, and offer a few personal comments from center managers regarding practical suggestions for a smoother design and administration of an actual assessment center in an industrial setting. This paper hopes to fill the void in this area.

Assessment centers have roots in methods developed in the late 1930’s by German military psychologists and later were utilized by the British for officer selection. Further development and refinement of these methods occurred during its use for selection of espionage agents by the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS), School and Training Section from October 1943 until the project’s conclusion in 1948 with the final report, *Assessment of Men* (Munchus III and McArthur, 1991). The next noticeable development in civilian application was the use of assessment centers by the U.S. telephone company, AT&T, which developed a longitudinal study of management progress.

Starting in the early 1950’s, AT&T’s objective was to identify those people who would have the capability of progressing to a managerial career, regardless of educational attainment and previous background. This work has been heavily influential in two directions. Firstly, it has been a substantial source of data for validating the utility of the method. Amazingly, the data gathered at the time of the center, in the form of a prediction of the grade the participant would ultimately achieve, were never released into the organization. At periodic intervals comparisons were made between predicted grade and what was actually attained. Following publication of the results, other companies, notably in the U.S., started flocking to AT&T to find out what was going on and to adopt the method themselves (Ballantyne and Povah 1995). It was not until the mid-1970s that interest peaked and Corporate America began using the technique for either selection or development of employees. The adoption of the technique was argued in terms of high management support, cost and employee commitment and rather questionable validity. Steady growth and use of assessment centers continued in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in America but spread to subsidiaries of U.S. multinationals in Europe. Dulewicz et al., (1983) pointed out that the main users of assessment centers at that time were subsidiaries of U.S. multinationals such as IBM, and Rank Xerox. The first author was fortunate to be invited to visit and have an interview with Dr. Douglas Bray who fostered the technique for AT&T and Dr. Byham who wrote the first articles about assessments centers to appear in the professional business/management literature. Together, they founded Developmental Dimensions International, Inc. (DDI), a company that has provided assessment services to many organizations around the world.

**Historical Review of Assessment Centers**

A survey of assessment center practices in organizations in the United States cite that despite the lack of uniformity in assessment center practices, professional guidelines regarding assessment center development and use, the Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations have been written (Spychalski, Quinones, Gaugler, and Pohley,1997; International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines, 2000). The guidelines developed and endorsed by practitioners who specialize in the use of assessment center method, are based on theory, research and practice in the field. However, the guidelines only suggest how
assessment centers should be developed and used; adherence to the prescriptions put forth in the guidelines by organizations is unknown.

In addition, to suggesting ways of constructing and using assessment centers, researchers have identified attributes of assessment centers that affect the validity of the data gathered with this method. For example, characteristics such as type of assessor, assessor familiarity with assessment, and source of performance rating have been found to moderate assessment center validity (Gaugler, Rosenthal, Thornton, & Bentsen, 1987; Schmitt, Schneider, & Cohen, 1990). Gaugler et al.’s study then prepared a survey to current users of assessment centers in the United States to determine current practices and conformity to existing guidelines for assessment operation. The researchers mailed surveys to 655 companies using assessment center technology, client lists and attendees at the International Congress on the Assessment Center Method and the International Association of Chiefs of Police Assessment Center conference. The authors offered findings from 215 individuals who completed the surveys. A summary of the findings are as follows (Gaugler et al., 1990):

- The Guidelines urge that a formal policy describing the relationship between the assessment center and the organization’s human resource system is written.
- The most popular reasons for initially developing an assessment center were selection (50.0%), promotion (45.8%), and development planning (39.2%).
- The most typical methods of selecting assessors were supervisor recommendation (53.3%), self nomination (43.9%), or performance on other selection devices (37.7%).
- Assessors typically held positions that were about two organizational levels above those of the candidates (M = 1.76 levels; SD = .71 levels)

In this study, direct supervisors usually did not serve as assessors and this practice should be used by others as well. Most of the time, candidates received oral feedback from assessment center personnel (70.5%), about their performance for about an hour (= 64.2 minutes; Standard Deviation = 37.2 minutes). They also received written reports on their performance (60.5%). In a few other respondents’, no performance feedback was provided (8.1%). In terms of center validation, consultants, either external (64.8%) or internal (40%) to the organization were usually responsible for assessment center design. Most of their respondents’ centers had been evaluated for reliability (51.9%) and/or validity (68.5%).

Some highlights from a more recent study by Eurich, Krause, Cigularov, and Thornton III (2009) whose purpose was to review current AC practices in the United States by evaluating whether they follow the Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations (International Task Force on Assessment Centers Guidelines, 2000) are as follows:

- An online survey was designed and distributed for completion by individuals from human resource departments of organizations (N=54) across the U.S.; organizations to whom the survey was sent were selected by sampling Fortune 500 organizations based on economic sector. And, 93% of organizations reported considering the Guidelines for AC development and use.
- Respondents indicated that prior to job analysis, 71% of organizations conducted need-oriented planning to determine AC content.
- In terms of the type of job analysis (multiple responses possible) conducted, their results show that 70% of the organizations use job descriptions (82%), 54% interviewed job incumbents, 47% interviewed supervisors, 40% gave questionnaires to incumbents and 30% observed job incumbents.
• About half of the organizations report developing their own ACs (54), with about one-fourth (24%) using adapted version, and just less than that (22%) using ‘off the shelf’ versions.

• According to the guidelines, behaviors in the ACs should be classified into dimensions ‘clusters of behaviors that can be defined and observed with consistency’ (Caldwell et al., 2003, p.77). More than half of organizations assessed between six and ten dimensions; 30%, 8-10 dimensions: and <10% used more than 15 dimensions.

• Results indicate the majority of organizations (64%) use between four and five exercises per AC.

• Besides exercises and simulations, although other diagnostic methods such as skill/ability tests (29%) and personality assessments (26%) were decidedly less common, their use however, has increased over time.

• Finally, counter to suggestions, less than half of organizations test exercises before implementation (41%). Although the decrease in AC pretesting is understandable given associated costs, to maximize validity and usability, the authors suggest that organizations pilot test exercises (Caldwell et. al. 2003).

The other findings in terms of Assessor Characteristics, Assessor Training, Behavior Recording, Rating Methods, Organizational Policy, Asseesee Selection, and Feedback were very consistent to previously stated research.

Validating the Assessment Center

The authors believe that the bottom line to validation rests around answers to two basic questions: 1) Does your assessment center do what it is supposed to do? 2) Does your assessment center work as well as it could?

The literature on validity is prolific so the authors will cite only a few compelling conclusions. The American Telephone and Telegraph Management Progress Study reported, in 1966, good predictive success in its use of the assessment center method five to eight years after assessment. Approximately 80% of those who had been assessed as capable of advancing to middle management within ten years had done so. Even more impressive is that 95% of those assessed as not capable of advancing to middle management had not done so (Munchus III and McArthus, 1991, p. 11).

The better the selection procedure simulates and resembles the job, the greater the assurance of content validity (the extent to which scores on a test, or other indices, represent performance within the specifically defined content area the tests purport to sample). The major validity argument used for advocating the assessment center approach which involves improvements to content validity is reflected by efforts to incorporate as many actual job demands as possible into the various tailored simulations (Frank and Preston, 1982, pp. 87-95). To better determine the training and development needs for each candidate, attempts to isolate the extent to which assessment center performance is a function of management skills, personality variables or business knowledge need to be undertaken early, thereby increasing the degree of construct validity (Thornton, and Byham, 1982). Correlations between assessment center predictions and various on-the-job performance measures ranged as high as 0.64 (Byham, 1970, pp.150-160.)
The assessment center method can be applied to managerial selection as well. It is a valuable technique for the identification of management potential. Promotion of those who achieved a good rating at the assessment center has led to an improvement in the quality of management at the first level of supervision, particularly in building a pool of managers with potential to advance to higher levels. In comparison with individuals promoted before the assessment program, almost twice as many of those rated high at the assessment center have demonstrated potential to advance beyond the first level of management (Campbell and Bray, 1993).

The Assessment Center Manager

Review of research seems to be scarce in this arena. As with any worth-while HR endeavor of this magnitude, much thought must be given to the selection of a person qualified to lead a challenging endeavor, be the lead person to research literature, make personal contacts, benchmark, compile relevant data, design, and present to senior management a sound program proposal. The authors suggest that this person be from inside the organization, have strong educational credentials, a proven record of prior program development and administration, strong leadership skills, be perceptive, proactive and respected by the organization. It is suggested that this person be given a great deal of autonomy and support from senior management. It is almost essential that this person be given some support staff for the administration of all the details to the successful adoption of an endeavor of this magnitude. It is suggested that private office space be provided with clerical support for the compilation and feedback of all final reports prepared for participants.

Results: The Process

The main feature of assessment centers as we now understand them is that they are a multiple assessment process. A group of participants takes part in a variety of exercises observed by a team of trained assessors who evaluate each participant against a number of predetermined, job related behaviors. Decisions are then made by pooling shared data (Ballantyne and Povah, 1995). It was the authors’ experience to keep the number of simulation exercises to a minimum as many simulations overlap in measuring similar characteristics which can lead to rater confusion. However, it is always good to measure important characteristics more than once. It appears that the number of traits assessed in any single assessment center vary (Moses, and Byham, 1977). However, the authors recommend that about six to seven is sufficient as it seems that behaviors for most management/supervision positions would cluster within that number.

Riggio and Bronston (1997) mention that the primary assessment center model in use today is generally based on the pioneering research by Douglas Bray at AT&T in the 1950’s. Bray’s model measures knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) derived from a job analysis. The KSAs typically include such traits and complex constructs as leadership, judgment, problem solving, decision making, etc. They are called performance dimensions. Hence researchers have used the term ‘dimension-specific’ assessment centers when referring to the assessment center process. The number of assessments is another important variable to consider. It seems that six persons whose list of characteristics to be assessed is similar, and who occupy similar positions in the organization are most suitable. The more candidates a center has to evaluate the more it may become overwhelming or tiring, and the authors believe that it may lead to less accurate
outcomes of the candidate’s performance. At numbers beyond 12 participants the logistics can get out of hand very easily (Ballantyne & Povah, 1995).

**Discussion: Determination of Essential Functional Requirements**

It is imperative to spend the time to develop a commonly agreed upon list of the functional requirements, interpersonal duties, environmental considerations, and factors bearing on the behavior required for successful performance in the target position. From this analysis a list of characteristics to be assessed is defined in behavioral terms to guide the assessment staff in selecting exercises to be used (Ballantyne & Povah, 1995). The authors suggest a few other valid sources to help determine the most relevant performance criterion. The Job Description lists many key behavior dimensions required of any position. A Job Analysis is another valuable tool which can be accomplished with the help of Human Resources, successful job incumbents, observation, job activity questionnaires or respected supervisors. Benchmarking may also be considered. More detail establishing truly differentiating behavior can only lend credibility to the predictive success of the center.

**Establishing the Right Mix of Exercises**

Emphasis needs to be placed on the selection of the right mix of exercises. First, some assurance that the candidate has ample opportunity to demonstrate his/her ability pertaining to a particular criterion must be clarified. Therefore, it is suggested to gather data from at least three to four exercises. As Ballantyne and Povah (1995) cite, it isn’t just how many different exercises measure a criterion, but the fact that people are usually expected to operate in a range of different situations. The content of the assessment center needs to reflect those different scenarios. In simple terms, we find ourselves working in three contexts: 1. in groups; 2. one-to-one; 3. working on our own.

**Selection and Training of Assessors**

A highly qualified team of assessors is of the utmost importance to the success of any assessment center. It is well established that assessors should be successful supervisors/managers at least one level above the position being selected for and across all disciplines or departments. The authors suggest using in-house personnel. The use of hiring from the outside can be very expensive, knowledge of the organization’s culture may be lost, and trust and respect of the candidates are just a few reasons why it is suggested to use internal assessors. An assessment center manager must be aware of the “bias” factor but it has been the authors’ experience that multiple assessors and exercises, the group discussion of observations and ratings, appropriate training, and multiple assessments all help to reduce this factor.

Another important successful variable of an assessor is the ability to accurately view, classify, rate a candidate’s qualifications against the selected criteria, and articulate this into a concise report format. Also, in today’s hectic industrial environment, assessors must be chosen who have the time and willingness to devote full attention to the task at hand for the results weigh heavy on a person’s future within the organization. While diverse opinions are critical in the evaluation of one’s qualifications, the ability to listen and compromise is paramount. From
the authors’ experience, nothing will demoralize a group decision making process more than a person not willing to be a good team player or one who is not willing to go with consensus.

It is recommended that an organization train at least three to four additional assessors in the event of work issues or illness. The number of assessors seems open for discussion but most researchers recommend six to twelve. It is the authors’ experience that six seems to be a very workable number. Any less may lead to sterile discussions and any more than six may make the discussion of performance become too long and some assessors may lose interest or say little.

Assessor Training on Relevant Performance Dimensions

Training of assessors is very important in the assessment center process. There are many training tools available to administrators once the essential criteria have been selected. Factor analyses have shown that dimension ratings cluster together within similar domains of performance (Thornton & Byham, 1982). The number of factors that emerge and their nature depends on what and how many dimensions are included in the assessment center. Two factors that fairly consistently appear are administrative and interpersonal skills. In more recent centers, leadership and performance management may be set apart from communication and general interpersonal skills. Another factor that also emerges in assessment centers includes cognitive ability tests (as cited by author Bray & Grant, 1966; Huck & Bray, 1976). When assessment dimensions move beyond skills and abilities into areas related to motivation, personality, or personal style, findings vary widely (Thornton & Byham, 1982).

Once the essential performance criteria have been determined the next step is to choose the appropriately designed and developed simulation exercises. Much work has been devoted to this by Dr. Bray and Dr. Byham in their company called DDI. The first author personally visited DDI to review various instruments developed to assess the chosen criterion related traits. Today, they are readily available through catalogs and videos. It is important that the center manager be comfortable with the simulations and training materials for he/she will be responsible for the training of assessors. It is recommended that training be conducted by the center manager and offsite if possible. The authors suggest a four day training program as well, since for an assessment center that comprises three to four behavioral exercises, it seems that about four days is appropriate but this will depend on how quickly the assessors become familiar with and come to consensus on identifying, classifying and rating the essential behavioral dimensions (criteria). Usually, assessors are asked to observe a sample work simulation, complete a listing of behavioral dimensions observed, describe them in writing and rate them on a scale of 1-5. After all assessors have completed their written report, they each are asked to read aloud their reports. Other assessors listen carefully and when the report is complete, each assessor is asked to comment. What is critical is that there is consensus on the classifying and the final rating on each criterion, usually within one rating point of the evaluating assessor. If not, a discussion commences until consensus is reached by all assessors.

This has proven to be very critical in the training of assessors. It is imperative to have the assessors be extremely close in the observation, classifying and rating of each behavioral criterion. The assessor training should begin with the center manager introducing each exercise, its design, purpose, and a sample demonstration. Make certain that this training is thorough and complete even with role players. This part of the training is critical as it is a simulation of the real thing. An organization may be able to purchase videos, from the exercise’s publishing company, demonstrating each exercise in motion or conduct a mock center by using hired role players. The end result is to assure that the assessors understand and can demonstrate the ability to
observe, record, classify and evaluate the chosen behavioral dimensions by the organization as being critical to the success of a particular position and possible candidates within a high degree of consensus. The candidate evaluation process should be discussed in some detail so as to prepare the assessors for the most important part of the entire center process.

Role Players

It is the authors’ experience that most centers use some sort of a Problem Employee exercise in which role players are used to play the part of the problem employee. It is recommended that candidates for this position be from local colleges and universities. Selection criteria might be such factors as age, self-assuredness, dependability and availability. Current research indicates that some organizations utilize professional actors. The authors do not believe this is necessary but optional. The main purpose is to choose qualified people and train them to make the exercise seem as real as possible and not staged. To assist in this, the authors suggest that the center manager train the selected role players, and use video to allow the role players to observe themselves in action. After viewing the video, allow open discussion to provide constructive critique. Also, it is suggested that assessors view a mock exercise for any further critique of role player performance. It is also suggested that the program administrator appoint a role player leader whose duties also include the coordination of assembling the necessary number of role players. Some extra remuneration is justified. The authors have had tremendous success utilizing local college and university students.

Scheduling the Exercises

The scheduling of exercises can become cumbersome but one of the main purposes of the center is that each criterion is measured in a number of different exercises and occasions. The schedule should be easy to explain and understand. The authors recommend keeping it simple and having each exercise occur simultaneously. The first author has experienced that different exercises occurring at different times becomes overwhelming to the center manager, participants and role-players. Little research has been done on the effect of exercise order but the authors recommend each center manager be sensitive to the placement of more time-consuming and difficult exercises and their possible effect on candidate performance. The authors recommend starting with a Leaderless Group Discussion and if an interview is used that it be early in the day or afternoon and not as a concluding exercise due to anxiety of the day. Avoid putting like exercises back to back. Allow ample time for the assessors to review their notes and begin writing their reports as soon as possible. Evaluating an exercise several hours after its occurrence certainly puts unnecessary strain on the assessors and may affect the validity of their observations. Arrange this by allowing the assessors to work with their notes while the candidates are preparing for the next exercise in which they are required to read, prepare notes, write memos, etc. An In-Basket would be a perfect example.

Room Allocation and Supplies

Ideally, the assessment center should be conducted off premises if possible. Dr. Bray occupied the top floor of one their AT&T buildings. Multiple rooms are suggested with one being able to accommodate all candidates, assessors and the assessment center manager. A large
circular table in the center is recommended with enough chairs for the participants, assessors and center manager to be arranged in a circular fashion around the middle table. It is paramount that each assessor be positioned to clearly observe the assigned candidate. There should be the availability of several small rooms to be used for such exercises as Interviews and Problem Employees where candidates may have the privacy to prepare individually for exercises. All rooms should have doors, desks, chairs, and any other necessary equipment such as an easel pad, paper and markers. All necessary supplies should arrive the day before the assessment so that no confusion occurs the morning of the event. This can be accomplished by the assessment center’s clerical help.

The assessment center manager and assistant should arrive early the morning of the assessment program to assure that the facilities are prepared for the arrival of all involved personnel, the identification and numbering of rooms to be used and the final center event and time schedule. Coffee and breakfast treats should be prepared.

**Briefings**

Before the assessment takes place, there are a number of people who need to be notified in writing or email as to procedures and schedules. Assessors, candidates, and role players need to know their assessment center schedule from start to finish. Assessor and candidate supervisors should also be advised of the employee’s required time commitment. Make certain that all involved personnel comprehend the necessity of being on time for all scheduled events as the entire assessment is designed to be accomplished within a predetermined time constraint which commands all involved personnel to be on time, no exception. Additionally, it is imperative that the candidate’s supervisors be very familiar with the Assessment Center, its purpose, and needed support. The authors recommend that this come from Human Resources early in the development process. The first author is sad to report that he has had several candidates say that they did not know what they were doing there, and were only told where and when to report. This should never be the case in any organization.

**Starting the Assessment**

The assessment should begin with a center manager introduction and thorough explanation of what is about to occur during the assessment center event. Research indicates that an introduction of about 15 minutes is sufficient. However, it was the author’s experience that this was totally underestimated, even in the case of using the assessment centers for development. The authors recommend at least a 30 to 60 minute, in depth, explanation. This should include an introduction of the assessment center history and purpose, a brief explanation of the center design and events, a brief overview of each exercise, the schedule, explanation of the use of assessors, roleplayers, the assessors observing and taking notes, the evaluation process and the final report along with taking any pertinent questions then and at the conclusion of the assessment. The assessors should all be called into the assembly room, introduced and each tell a little about themselves. Room layout should be explained and a tour provided if deemed appropriate.

From personal experience, the first author witnessed several candidates faint, get physically ill, leave, and never return. Anxiety is a major influencing factor that must be recognized and dealt with. The authors cannot emphasize this enough: It is imperative that the center manager do everything within their power to assist the candidates in relaxing as much as
possible in this situation. One has to realize the pressure of the exposure factor that each candidate is dealing with—not only with their peers, but supervisors, managers, and even perhaps senior management. All of the above suggestions are to try to help reduce the candidate’s stress. Assessment center literature indicates that anxiety is felt in varying degrees among candidates. Teel and DuBois (1983) found that about half of both high and low assessment center performance was impaired by stress (Fletcher and Kerslake, 1993). Research indicates that most assessments last from a day to a day and a half depending on the number of exercises. The authors recommend keeping the assessment to a maximum of a day and a half, shorter if possible.

Starting time is usually 8 AM with a concluding time of around 4 PM. The starting of the assessor evaluations should begin as soon as possible. Allow the assessors some time to regroup and complete any necessary notes and ratings. The authors recommend accomplishing as much as possible in the time available to the assessors the same afternoon and evening the assessment ends. If all candidates final evaluations cannot be completed that evening, arrange an early start time for the next day until all of them are accomplished. If a one and a half day assessment center program is used, the second day should end around 11-11:30 AM. Lunch time would be advisable at noon time, and reconvene about 1:00 PM. Commence and hopefully complete all candidate evaluations that day. The center manager should use good judgment as to appropriate break times.

**Administering the Exercises**

Above all, the center manager should devote adequate time for the clear explanation of each exercise complete with starting and ending times. This may not be appropriate for all exercises such as an Interview or Problem Employee exercise in which this gesture might become a distraction. This may even be displayed on a white board for consistency. It is advisable that the center manager and assistant be readily available during the assessment to assure smooth administration of the schedule and answer any questions by assessors or candidates. It is suggested that because assessors may not be full-time and used on a rotating basis, that periodic briefings be conducted to refresh them on each exercise, the relevant criterion to be evaluated and a brief review of their observation notes and final reports, if requested.

**Closing Remarks to Participants**

A professional way to conclude an assessment is to assemble all candidates, assessors, role players, the assessment center manager, and the assistant and conclude the program with a note of appreciation for everyone’s time and support. Details such as what takes place from that point (assessor preparation of final evaluation report), candidate feedback schedule and format, encouragement not to discuss any details of the assessment once the candidates return to their job, the use of a follow-up questionnaire, if used, the value of the assessment and refreshments may be served (optional). It is a time for all people involved to relax and say goodbye to each other.
The Assessor Discussion

The assessor discussion should begin soon after the candidates have left and the assessors have had time to put finishing touches on their reports. It is strongly recommended that all assessors have completed their reports and final evaluation ratings before beginning. If not, this will only bog down the final evaluation process. An assessment center manager must be cognizant of the effort the assessors have put forth and be aware of the time involved to complete this next very critical portion. The manager must be extremely organized and keep this portion on target in terms of objectives, fatigue and time constraints. It seems that a common technique is to take each candidate in turn, then proceed in criterion order to each exercise with a view to achieve the consensus score on all the criteria. However, Boyle, Fullerton and Wood (1995) point out that there are numerous ways of doing this, of which they list three:

- Assessor reports evidence and then gives own rating - other assessors are invited to discuss the evidence and agree or amend if appropriate. This is perhaps the most traditional approach and was used by 60% of their UK practitioner sample.
- Assessor reports evidence and then the group agrees on the rating – other assessors discuss the evidence and jointly agree on a rating. This approach was employed 19% of the time.
- Assessors report evidence and then assessors individually assign ratings, then group agreement is next, and then other assessors assign their ratings which are announced and discussed prior to a group decision by consensus or averaging. This approach was also employed 19% of the time.

Further discussion of these approaches led to the conclusion of no one recommendation. The author recommends that, during training, the center manager might introduce these alternatives to the assessors to solicit their opinions. The manager might call for a consensus vote on the technique most comfortable to them. From personal experience, the authors would suggest choice number one. This method seemed most comfortable, led to the least controversy, easily led to an open discussion of different points of view, which in some cases, led to a willingness for change, in the final rating, by the reporting assessor.

Resolving Debates

This is an important area of discussion as, sometimes, there will be strong opinions felt about what has been reported by the reporting assessor. Ballantyne and Povah (1995) point out that the manager try to avoid giving a personal view of summary ratings, either by criteria or on the individual. If, having listened to the evidence and the debate, an assessor feels that this participant merits no more than a ‘2’ and yet the assessors are agreed on a ‘4’ then it is likely that standards on this criterion need discussion. If it is clear that the center manager does not understand how the assessors are evaluating information then further discussion is necessary, to get to the point where common standards of judgment are reached. It does not actually matter who moves in which direction. What does matter is that a benchmark is worked out and applied consistently.

It was the authors experience that a ‘3’ be indicative of acceptable performance. A two point variance in either direction would warrant discussion and consensus. The authors suggest that the center manager should focus any debates only between the assessors having the discrepancy, for it is they who must come to some kind of consensus. The other assessors should
be encouraged to listen to the written reports, points made by the assessors and offer constructive critique if they feel necessary. It has been the authors’ experience that many debates have come to a quick conclusion once the differing assessors have an opportunity to explain their rating and other assessors offer their sage observations. The authors have not witnessed an unsolvable standoff in all the years of assessment center experience.

The Assessment Center Report

Research is not unanimous on this point. There appears to be many acceptable forms of a final report. The authors support a format offered by Ballantyne and Povah (1995, p.22). The authors offer the format provided in Table 1 as a guide for the assessment center report.

Table 1 - Assessment Center Report Format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Personal Profile by Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Description of Performance on Individual Criteria (about one page / criterion.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2. Overall Performance Summary (This is a copy of the participant performance matrix)</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>2. Personal Profile by Type of Exercise</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Group Exercise (s) (This section summarizes the individual’s performance when working with others. It will also highlight how the individual seems to perform in different types of group exercises or indeed different group sizes, if such data are available.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 One-to-One Exercises (This section describes the individual’s performance across the range of such exercises—again highlighting any variations where appropriate.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Working alone Exercises (This would typically include the In-Basket and or Analysis Exercise and would again summarize the individual’s overall performance on such tasks.)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>3. Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(This section highlights the individual’s main strengths and their most significant weaknesses, usually two or three. It is generally about one page in length).</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>4. Development Needs and Action Plan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(This section, usually about one page, highlights the key development needs and outlines actions that need to be undertaken to address those needs. It will also include any job-related recommendations, or if necessary these can be shown under a separate heading.)</td>
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</tbody>
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Writing the Final Report

There are several options for the center manager, the assessors, and the participants to write a report. The authors recommend that the center manager write the final report as he/she will have the most experience in assessment center matters and will have been present for all the assessor evaluation discussions. Also, this leads to all reports being written in a consistent manner. Realizing that this approach may take the most time, the authors have found that each report becomes less time consuming due to the similarity of observations, performance descriptions, evaluations, and recommendations. The center manager would also have a better understanding of the resources available within the organization to assist in development.
recommendations. At this stage, the thoroughness of the assessor’s written reports is critical. The time spent on this portion of assessor training is invaluable.

Feedback

From the authors’ perspective, this is the most important portion of the center process and by which the center achieves its purpose, be it employee selection or development. If used for development, the feedback will be in more detail to motivate the individual to put any recommendations to the utmost of use. The authors recommend that the feedback be conducted within one week from the end of the assessment and in a private, closed door facility by the center manager, face-to-face with no other persons present. The details of this session are of critical concern. Remember, the objective of this session is to convince the participant of the value of the assessment to their personal growth, either within or without the organization. The center manager must demonstrate many characteristics such as specificity, descriptive, not evaluative, provide understandable information and in small amounts, show empathy and concern, express openness to any questions during the feedback, and provide one’s own judgment as to alternative courses of action if requested.

Remember that a candidate is going to be very anxious about this feedback session. The authors recommend doing everything possible to help relax the candidate. Do some personal chatting before starting the feedback. Talk about current events, jobs, reactions to the assessment, and the like. Perhaps one can choose a Friday for feedback; this gives the candidate the weekend to think over the results about what was discussed. Leave the door open to any questions the candidate might have after the feedback. The authors did not witness many, if any questions after the feedback sessions. This of course, might depend on the thoroughness of the written report and substantiation of observed performance. The more descriptive the behavioral criterion measured, the less ambiguous it will be.

The Final Report

Each candidate should receive a personal book of assessment center results. The book should follow the format described under the Assessment Center Report of this paper. The book should serve as the basis of the feedback session. It is advisable to provide the candidate a copy and the assessor keeps another. This expedites feedback and allows the candidate to make any notes desired. The manager’s copy should remain in the center library for future reference. The book also serves as a reference for candidate reference of assessed behaviors, assessor observations, criterion ratings, suggestions for improvement, and perhaps developmental plans.

The Developmental Plan

If the assessment center is used for selection, the design of a developmental plan usually is not necessary. If the assessment center is used for development, this section is very important. In the developmental plan for internal candidates, it is essential that employees realize and accept that the success of the recommended developmental plan rests on three participants: the training and development professional, the participants’ manager, and the individual. To assist in helping the participant develop any weaknesses, the development plan should focus on suggesting opportunities to engage in appropriate job-related situations and provided immediate feedback by either their manager, coach or program manager.
Participants Reaction for First Time Assessment Users

It would be beneficial if some type of follow-up is conducted within a reasonable time after the assessment. This follow-up may take many forms. A follow-up email with assessors and participants may reveal pertinent feelings and suggestions regarding their experience and comments or suggestions for future assessments. If this suggestion is used, it is recommended that this feedback be provided as soon as possible in order for the center to capture the remembered feelings of all parties before things may become forgotten. The email may contain a limited number of predetermined open-ended questions or a check mark system with relevant questions with ratings from unsatisfactory to satisfactory with a space allotted for ratings falling below satisfactory. It is recommended that feedback forms be kept short and to the point.

Use of Current Technology

This case study paper was written for the design and administration of assessment centers without any consideration for the universal availability of software programs. Software is another subject entirely and not the purpose of this paper. Before an organization decides how to design an assessment center, the authors suggest a thorough review of research and current literature for a great deal of information has been written in the 1990s. Then it is up to the organization to decide how to proceed. A great deal of the decision depends upon cost, practicality, comfortableness and the way of incorporating current findings into best practices. The authors believe the bottom line involves the selection of techniques and procedures that will best ensure the closeness to construct validity. Ballantyne and Povah (1995, pp. 168-169) cite the following excellent examples on achieving this goal:

• Design exercises so that they have a maximum of six criteria to measure.
• Design behavioral checklists that are specific to the behaviors in the exercise.
• Train assessors adequately in the skills of spotting criteria, using such enhancing methods as “Frame of reference’ (FOR) training.
• Make sure assessors are trained to assess exercises so they can contribute to the wash-up of each other’s assessments.
• Focus wash-up (discussions where assessors pool their judgments and reach consensus about participants’ performance on the criteria) discussions about a candidate to one criterion at a time, do not reveal the whole matrix, so that possible influence from other criteria is avoided.
• As the center manager, try to discourage repeated assessor discussion about how a participant did in an exercise.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the use of assessment centers dating back to the 1940’s. Use of assessment centers has spread to many different types of organizations from the Military to the industrial. The authors have had the privilege to develop and work with them for several organizations in corporate America. Much initial research has been done in the United Kingdom as well. After much review of assessment center literature, the authors realized that much has been written regarding the design and administration of assessment technology but little, if any,
regarding personal experiences, opinions, and suggestions from a user’s perspective to help first time professionals and organizations considering assessment centers for integration and use. This case has tried to fill that void. The comments, suggestions, and recommendations are based on personal experiences using the technology for over twenty years and hopefully will be of use to organizations contemplating the use of assessment center technology, those in the formulating stage or those who are already using it.

It is well known that the use of assessment centers is very expensive and time intensive but the authors, along with many other practitioners, feel that assessment centers have proven an invaluable tool in the selection and development of personnel as it has been estimated that it costs up to two and a half times a position’s salary to make a mistake in the selection of an individual. Research supports the use of assessment centers as a sound Human Resource program. Furthermore, it has been proven that the assessment center does what it purports to do and this is to assist in a standardized process to assess the behaviors that are important to function well in the prospective job. However, as Vloeberghs and Berghman (May 2003, p. 535) cite that one of the issues to further investigate is the (mis)interpretation in practice of the difference between developmental centers and assessment centers? As discussed, both centers’ use basic methods that can be much alike but as the purpose of each tool is entirely different a different approach is a strong topic of concern.

References


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