

Professional issues in the use of selection tests

In the absence of any detailed statutory regulation, professional bodies such as the CIPD and the British Psychological Society (BPS) have drawn up guides to professional usage. A 'Quick facts' download is also provided on the CIPD website, which includes advice on ethical issues as well as achieving value for money when choosing selection tests. The following six points summarise the most significant ideas set out in the CIPD guide:

- Selection decisions should not be made using psychological tests alone. If used, they should always form a part of a wider selection process. Inferences made from test results should always be backed up with data from other sources.
- Anyone in the organisation who has responsibility for supervising applicants taking tests, evaluating results or giving feedback should have gained the relevant certificate of competence from the BPS. In the case of ability tests, these people should be trained and certificated to level A, and in the case of personality tests, to level B.
- Feedback from tests should be given to all candidates – successful as well as unsuccessful – concerning their performance in tests. However, such feedback should be given only by individuals who have been professionally trained in interpreting test results and who are skilled at giving appropriate feedback.
- The only tests that should be used are those that 'have been through a rigorous development process with proper regard to psychological knowledge and processes'. It is also important to ensure that any test used does not discriminate unfairly on grounds of gender, ethnicity or disability.
- Test users should maintain the highest possible standards of confidentiality, with results made available only to those with 'a genuine need to know'.
- Test results should be used only to make decisions between candidates when they are shown to have a clear potential impact on likely performance in the job in question. Test results should not therefore be used as the basis for making decisions based on personal preference for a particular character type.

Perhaps the biggest problem for HRM practitioners is making sure that what they are being sold by the test providers does in fact conform to the above standards. It is very tempting, when being offered an apparently plausible product at a competitive price, to overlook the lack of evidence of BPS approval or the lack of professional training needed to operate the test. The best advice in such circumstances is to seek professional assistance from a chartered psychologist. The BPS can recommend appropriate professionals for this purpose. When considering introducing tests or replacing existing products, it is also a good idea to research the issues explored above thoroughly and to familiarise yourself with the alternative products on the market. The bigger and more reputable providers of tests have now formed a professional body (the Business Test Publishers Association) to which the publishers of less sophisticated testing instruments are not admitted. The BPS has also set up an extensive website that provides a good source of information on professional issues in selection testing (www.psychtesting.org.uk). Sources of further reading on this and other relevant topics are given at the end of the chapter.

Simulations

The most significant contemporary development in the practice areas covered in this chapter is the increasing use of simulation exercises. Sometimes these are used as part of an assessment centre, candidates being asked to react to unexpected occurrences such as might occur if they were to be selected to do the job. More often, however, simulations take the form of sophisticated computer-based exercises that are used to shortlist candidates for interview. Some are bespoke (ie designed for a particular corporation), but it is possible to purchase packages 'off the shelf' that are designed to help weed out the less suitable candidates.

In either case the simulation aims to test how far a candidate is comfortable taking decisions and operating in an environment that is similar to the one that they have applied to work in. Producers and users of simulations argue that aside from being useful and effective selection tools, a good simulation also acts as a realistic job preview and thus helps candidates to decide for themselves whether or not they are really suited to a job and if they will enjoy it.

(SOURCES: Smethurst, 2006; Allen, 2007b)

Assessment centres

The assessment centre has been referred to as 'the Rolls Royce' of selection methods, and is the approach that has received the best all-round press of any surveyed in this and the previous chapter. Validity studies have consistently found assessment centre techniques to have good predictive ability, and they appear to be liked by candidates too. There is also plenty of evidence to demonstrate that they are increasingly being used all over the world as part of employee selection exercises (see Povah and Thornton, 2011). Perhaps the only drawback, albeit an important one, is the cost associated with their preparation and administration.

Assessment centres involve assembling in one place several candidates who are applying for the same position and putting them through a variety of different tests. Centres can be operated over one day, but usually involve an overnight stay. They will typically include a conventional interview, together with paper-and-pencil tests both of mental ability and personality. In addition, a range of other exercises are included to test a variety of specific competencies. It is the presence of so many different selection tools acting together that is thought to account for the high validity that the approach has been found to possess. This permits assessors to observe candidates' behaviour in a number of distinct situations, removing the need to make inferences based on only one technique (interview, psychometric test, application form, etc).

However, most centres are not exclusively concerned with the identification of underlying personality traits or constructs, as is the case with personality testing. Instead, the aim is to observe actual behaviour in a work-related situation. The concern is not therefore with identifying an underlying predisposition to be assertive, conscientious, sociable or whatever, but to assess each candidate's actual actions

and reactions when they are placed in job-related situations. A particular feature of the method is its ability to focus on potential rather than on achievement. Unlike the other commonly used selection methods, assessment centres are not concerned with making inferences about the candidates' likely future performance from evidence of their past activities. Instead, the focus is on anticipating how potential employees are likely to behave, if appointed, from direct observation of their behaviour in circumstances similar to those they are likely to encounter on the job.

A number of researchers have pointed out that, in practice, assessors tend to resist scoring candidates according to specific psychological dimensions, but instead prefer to judge their general performance in each exercise (Woodruffe, 1993: 199–203; Meiring *et al*, 2015). In other words, managers who are supposed to be looking out for evidence of specific behaviours when observing an assessment centre activity end up giving high scores to those candidates of whom they have formed a generally good impression, whatever specific behaviours are demonstrated. The result is an apparent preference on the part of managers to see the assessment centre as an extended interview or work sample rather than as a psychometric selection technique.

According to the CIPD (2017b), assessment centres are used for the selection of some staff by 39 per cent of organisations. However, the extent of their usage increases very steeply with the size of employer (they are used by 75 per cent of organisations employing over 5,000 people, but by only 20 per cent of those employing fewer than 200 staff). There seems to be little variation between industrial sectors, with most larger private- and public-sector organisations employing the assessment centre approach in the selection of managers, professional grades and new graduates.

The fact that assessment centres are mainly used by larger organisations is not surprising when the costs associated with the development and running of an effective centre are considered. At the very least, the following activities have to be undertaken and either paid for directly or accounted for in terms of management time:

- analysis of the key competencies required to perform the job in question;
- the development of appropriate exercises to measure or permit observation of the competencies;
- the purchase of psychometric tests or other proprietary products to use at the assessment centre;
- shortlisting of applicants to be invited to the centre;
- training of assessors and other employees actively involved in conducting the exercises;
- food and accommodation at the centre for candidates and assessors;
- the presence of senior managers to act as observers and interviewers;
- the giving of meaningful feedback to successful and unsuccessful candidates;
- evaluation and validation.

When it is considered that to run an effective assessment centre it is necessary to have a candidate–assessor ratio of around 2:1 it is easy to see how the costs can mount up – especially when a number of centres are set up for the selection of different staff groups. For this reason, the approach is only really appropriate for the selection of individuals who fall into one or more of the following categories:

- people who will be employed in the most senior positions with large numbers of staff to supervise or sizeable budgets to manage;

- people who will be employed to undertake work that is absolutely crucial to the success of the organisation (perhaps jobs in which the making of errors has unusually important consequences);
- people (like graduates) who are expected to remain employed by the organisation for a long period and in whom significant investment will be made.

In-tray exercises

A common exercise used in assessment centres is the in-tray or in-basket test. Here each candidate sits at a desk or in front of a computer screen and is presented with a series of documents to read through. The pile consists of a mixture of memos, letters, notes, telephone messages, emails and other documents related to the job for which candidates attending the centre are applying. Participants are then given a limited amount of time to read the documents and state what action they would take in each situation. In some tests they are explicitly required to prioritise their actions by listing what they would do, and in what order, on an answer sheet. Tests of this kind are increasingly administered electronically.

The more sophisticated in-tray tests take place over a two- or three-hour period and require candidates to digest fairly complex written material before recommending courses of action. It is also possible for assessors to introduce extra documents to the in-tray and to assess completed work (the out-tray) at set time-intervals. A further variation involves instructing candidates to demonstrate writing skills by composing a letter or report in reaction to an item in the in-tray. In some centres, candidates are interviewed after completing the test to allow assessors to explore their thinking and the reasons for the decisions they have made.

In-tray exercises have a number of very useful functions. They are relatively straightforward to develop and can be undertaken by all candidates at the same time. However, their greatest advantage is the number of different competencies they require candidates to demonstrate. According to Jansen and de Jongh (1997: 36), these include intelligence, interpersonal sensitivity, planning and organising ability, delegation skills, problem analysis, problem-solving ability and decisiveness. While the test requires candidates to give an indication of their interpersonal style and approach to dealing with colleagues and customers, it clearly does not directly test social skills such as assertiveness or a candidate's ability to negotiate effectively. On the other hand, as Edenborough (2005: 146) points out, there is huge and very valuable scope to tailoring the content quite closely to the organisation's actual day-to-day activities.

In recent years assessment centres have also often featured other types of exercise that aim to test similar types of ability to in-trays. These are known as situational judgement tests (see Corstjens *et al*, 2017). Here, instead of requiring a candidate to react quickly to a series of scenarios, more involved organisational problems are presented about which written advice is sought. Level 7 exams set by the CIPD typically include case study-based questions that require candidates to give and justify advice. These are similar in nature to situational judgement tests of the kind that are often used as part of assessment centres.

Group exercises

Interpersonal competence is usually tested by means of a variety of group exercises that a group of four or five candidates carry out together. A common approach is the

'leaderless' project, in which the group is given instructions to carry out a particular task and a time limit, but group members are left to decide for themselves how the project is to be tackled and who is to do what. The aim here is to allow assessors to observe how each candidate behaves in relation to the others. The kind of questions they will be looking for answers to are: Does someone take the lead? Does someone hold back but contribute effectively later? Does someone negotiate between opposing views? Is one candidate more persuasive than the others?

Some assessment centres give groups fairly involved tasks to complete, some of which resemble management games more commonly used for developmental purposes. In some cases the group is presented with a problem to which there is a definite right answer. The assessors then observe which of the candidates played the greatest part in reaching it, and how this was achieved. Other group exercises are open-ended, the instruction being simply to design or build something, to draw up a strategy or action plan, or to agree among themselves a common position on some issue. Often the group is then required to present their solution to the panel of assessors. Such exercises test creativity and the ability to present ideas confidently, as well as a wide range of interpersonal skills. An interesting feature of some group exercises is the use of the outdoors to allow for greater flexibility in the type of tasks the group is required to undertake.

Other group exercises differ in that candidates are, in turn, assigned leadership roles. The content of the tests is similar but the types of behaviour being observed are different, the emphasis being on how well and using which methods the leader motivates others, exercises effective control or delegates tasks. The difficulty with such approaches arises from the unavoidable presence of competition between candidates who are, after all, applying for the same job. To discourage other group members from undermining the 'leader' it is necessary to point out that other behaviours are also being observed (eg the ability to work as an effective team member).

Presentations

Most assessment centres also contain exercises that require candidates to make some kind of presentation or put a case to other participants and assessors. Again, these come in many different forms. At one extreme is the highly unpleasant exercise in which candidates are required to speak off-the-cuff for a few minutes on a subject, without notice. In turn they are simply given a subject and asked to respond immediately. Understandably, many find this very difficult and find themselves either waffling or drying up completely. At the other end of the scale are exercises that test the candidates' ability to make a longer and more considered presentation. Typically this approach involves giving each candidate some information to read – perhaps concerning a specific organisational problem – before explaining that they have a limited period of time to prepare a presentation.

Role-playing

A variety of assessment centre exercises employ the services of staff members to play roles of one kind or another. The classic exercise involves observing how a candidate deals with an irate customer, but there is no reason why other job-related scenarios should not be included. Role-playing is a good way of observing how effectively someone deals with subordinates in need of emotional support or effective counselling.

It could also be used as a means of scoring candidates in terms of their ability to handle the disciplining of subordinates or negotiations with hard-bargaining suppliers. Another test that makes use of role-playing is the fact-finding exercise, in which candidates are given incomplete written information about an organisational problem. They then each have a limited time to question a role-player with a view to discovering the missing information. In some versions, the person playing the role is under instructions to be evasive or to challenge the line of questioning. According to Jansen and de Jongh (1997: 39), when properly designed, fact-finding exercises allow assessors to evaluate candidates in terms of their intelligence, thoroughness and decisiveness, as well as their interpersonal skills.

Other tests used include exercises requiring candidates to compile an extensive piece of written work in the form of a report, and all manner of problem-solving exercises carried out alone rather than in groups. Other organisation-specific exercises include some of the work-sample and trainability selection techniques identified above. Ideally, more than one exercise will be devised to test each of the key behaviours the assessment centre is concerned with identifying. The aim here is to reduce the extent to which situational factors may obscure a candidate's abilities. It is possible, for example, that one participant might appear to have poor skills of persuasion when observed carrying out a group activity, but will subsequently show

Table 11.1 Barclays personnel procedures manual – sample assessment centre matrix

Competencies	Exercises						Total
	GE	IT	PRES	IV	OPQ	WR	
Analysis		X	X			X	3
Business awareness		X		X			2
Competitive	X			X	X		3
Decision-making	X	X					2
Drive/enthusiasm			X	X			2
Leadership	X				X		2
Oral communication	X		X				2
Written communication		X			X		2
Planning/organising		X				X	2
Interpersonal sensitivity	X			X	X		3
Achievement/motivation			X		X		2
Total	5	5	4	4	5	2	25

SOURCE: IDS, 1995b

Key

GE = group exercise

IT = in-tray

PRES = presentation

IV = interview

OPQ = occupational personality questionnaire

WR = written report

considerable persuasive skills in giving a presentation. The more tests that are included to test each key attribute, the more chance there is of seeing the whole picture.

A common method used to demonstrate which exercises are testing which competences is the assessment centre matrix. An example is shown in Table 11.1.

Assessment centres throw up particular issues concerning fairness. Aside from the need to ensure that equal opportunities law is complied with and that tests do not unfairly discriminate on grounds of sex, race or disability, there is also a potential problem of unfair bias towards candidates with relevant work experience. A special difficulty arises when internal as well as external candidates are present at the same assessment centre. There are two alternative approaches to coping with this:

- Take care to design exercises that are job-related but do not give a particular advantage to those with extensive knowledge of the job or the organisation.
- Retain the organisation-specific exercises while taking account of the advantages to internal and experienced candidates at the scoring stage.



Activity 11.3

Selecting spies

Read the article by Charles Woodruffe entitled 'Intelligence test' featured in *People Management* (16 May 2002, pages 36–7). This can be downloaded from the *People Management* archive on the CIPD's website (www.cipd.co.uk).

This article discusses the experiences of MI5 in developing an assessment centre for use in the selection of graduate recruits. The author says very little about what the assessment centre actually contains, but the way it was put together and continues to be managed are explained very effectively.

Questions

- 1 What aspects of the MI5 assessment centre have led the author to conclude that it is a good example of best practice?
- 2 How would you define poor practice in the development and management of assessment centres?
- 3 What characteristics do you think the MI5 centres are designed to identify in applicants? What types of exercise would test for these most effectively?

Gamification

An innovation in employee selection that is getting a lot of attention is 'gamification', which is simply defined as the use of game-like activities to test job applicants' ability to do certain things, exhibit behaviours desired by the employing organisation or more generally to establish how someone may react in different types of situation. At present very few organisations in the UK have adopted these techniques – only 2 per cent according to the CIPD's 2017 talent management survey (CIPD, 2017b) – but

there is evidence of more interest developing over time. In the USA the market for selection-oriented computer games has grown quickly in recent years, making this a multi-billion dollar industry (Fetzer *et al*, 2017). The products look and feel like regular computer games, featuring simulations of various kinds using animation or live action filmed material. Some have similarities with action-based or adventure games and are designed to test how quickly people are able to make effective decisions under a degree of pressure. Others are more strategy-oriented, designed to test a candidate's judgement and experience. Research on the true effectiveness of these game-based selection techniques is as yet limited, but there is some evidence to suggest that candidates easily become fully immersed in playing the games, less anxious about a selection process and that they are thus less liable to present an inauthentic persona. There is also evidence to suggest that because candidates enjoy playing games when being tested they are more likely to form a favourable view of the organisation and hence accept a job if it is offered (Hawkes *et al*, 2018).



Explore further

- A number of texts cover all four of the selection methods discussed in this chapter as well as the legal and ethical issues. These include *Assessment methods in recruitment, selection and performance* by Robert Edenborough (2005) and *Personnel selection* by Mark Cook (2016). More extensive academic treatments are found in *The Oxford handbook of personnel assessment and selection* edited by Neal Schmitt and in *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of the psychology of recruitment, selection and employee retention* edited by Harold Goldstein *et al* (2017).