

Assessment centre roles: the assessor

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Key learning points

- The key elements of assessing.
- The required skills of the assessor with hints and tips.
- Blockages to objective assessment.

Introduction

This is the second of two modules dealing with the key assessment centre roles: the facilitator, the role-player and the assessor. The activities, skills and information described are, of course, not confined to assessment centres, but have wider applications.

This module deals with the skills needed for the assessor's role. Assessing is a required skill for any professional trainer and will be useful in a variety of situations.

Let's start by looking at you as the assessor.

Purpose

In an assessment centre, assessing is the key function. All other elements are there to give you the best possible opportunity to observe the behaviours being assessed and to make objective judgements. These notes are intended to help you with the task of assessing.

Legal requirements

In addition to improving the objectivity of the assessment process, the assessment

documents support the company in the event of a legal challenge. It is therefore advisable to retain them.

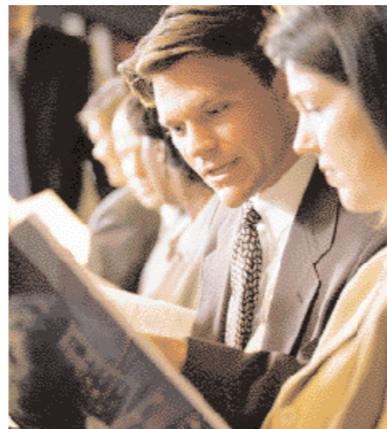
The task

The task of assessment is difficult. Whether in a selection centre, the task of observing and evaluating an individual's behaviour requires a degree of objectivity that is hard to achieve. You must maintain an evaluative frame of reference that is both flexible and stable. It must be flexible enough so that different individuals can be given comparable consideration, and stable enough so that individual differences in behaviour can be appropriately observed and evaluated.

You must be given extensive training before starting on any evaluative assignment. However, you – like other human beings – regardless of training, are always making judgements about the behaviour of others. You judge friends, family, workmates, public figures of all kinds, and others that you meet casually in your day-to-day living.

The way we are

Because we are continually involved in assessing and evaluating, we develop our own evaluative models to make this more efficient and expedient. Unfortunately, these models often distort our observation, making our conclusions incorrect and invalid. Why?



This is because:

- We tend to develop stereotypes that enable us to place people into easy-to-deal-with categories. For example, 'army type' or 'air-head blonde'.
- We tend to make premature judgements based on limited subjective evidence. For example, someone is a 'star' or an 'idiot' based on the way they greet us.
- We come to hold that certain standards of behaviour are of value, whether or not they really are. For example, being able to take a joke.
- We oversimplify by making inferences about one characteristic on the basis of possession of some other characteristic. For example, we may say that university-educated people are intelligent – equating intelligence with knowledge.
- In general, we develop models of the world with the intention of making the job of evaluation more efficient and expedient. Unfortunately, these models often distort our observation, making our conclusions incorrect and invalid.

The assessor

You should be selected as an assessor because you have some basic characteristics. These are:

- Able to observe accurately behaviours and the impact of those behaviours.
- Able to be objective in your observations.
- Able to record the observations accurately.
- Able to assess the observed behaviours against the required criteria and objectives.

In a selection centre you must have the authority to make the selection or rejection decision. In a development centre you must have a sound knowledge of training and development processes, and the skills of feedback.

Assessors are trained to carry out the assessments. The elements of their training are:

- basic transferable assessment skills;
- specific knowledge and understanding of the particular assessment centre.

Basic assessment skills are transferable between centres. This training sharpens your natural observational skills, gives you an assessment process and a foundation in the major elements that constitute an assessment centre.

The specifics of a particular assessment centre enable you, with your transferable assessing skills, to operate effectively and efficiently.

Assessing does have one characteristic in common with sex and driving a car: most people think they are good at it!

It is crucial that you practise. To do this, you will have to be involved in assessing regularly. It requires a commitment from you. With practice you will improve.

Assessment process

The assessment process consists of four steps:

- **Observe** what is actually happening, is said, and so on;
- **Record** what is observed;

- **Classify** the observations to the criteria/competencies;
- **Evaluate** the performance in each criterion against a required standard.

Observe → Record → Classify → Evaluate

Fig. 2: Assessment process

Conclusion

The process of assessment is a difficult, exhausting and delicate job, yet **the success and worth of the assessment centre depends upon the quality of the assessor – you**. It is for this reason that you must be extremely careful to keep the following points in mind while you are serving as an assessor:

- 1 Keep the behaviours you evaluate separate from one another.
- 2 Avoid making final judgements until all observations have been made.
- 3 Avoid thinking that a person who possesses characteristics similar to your own is good, and one who has somewhat different characteristics is bad.
- 4 Try to give up possibly false values or standards of success that you have and concentrate on the behaviour you are observing. If you are convinced of your values and standards, write down the specific observable behaviours that will tell you whether the candidate is meeting them.
- 5 Avoid categorising people into various classes based on stereotypes that you hold and, instead, concentrate on an individual as an individual.
- 6 Avoid overusing the middle part of a scale when it is not justified, or being too lenient or severe. Do not be afraid to use the extremes of the scale when it is necessary.

In summary, concentrate on the behaviour you are observing and be sure that your assessments are based completely upon observed behaviour.

Authors

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Pitfalls and how to overcome them

With these thoughts of the way we are in mind, the following points attempt to illustrate some of the problems that you may encounter. Reading these descriptions should help you to maximise the effectiveness of your assessing as well as to minimise much of the subjectivity and unreliability that can colour your assessments.

Halo and horns effect

This refers to allowing a general impression of goodness or badness to influence specific behaviours you are evaluating.

This is probably the most common error made by assessors. If the general impression is favourable (halo), you may tend to rate a person high on desirable behaviours. If the general impression is unfavourable (horns), the opposite applies.

Tip: Concentrate on the specific criterion and think about specific examples of the behaviours you are evaluating.

Logical error

A related tendency is to base judgements of some behaviours on others that seem logically grouped.

When you are considering six or eight criteria, it is easy to find some that seem to relate to each other or overlap in some way. It is also difficult to keep so many behaviours separate in your mind. However, it is wrong to assume that because an individual exhibits a high degree of self-confidence, they are also a high-risk-taker, or vice versa. It is easy to fall into the trap, for example, of assuming that a good communicator is also a good decision-maker or a good leader. Such conclusions are unwarranted.

Tip: To make accurate judgements, each criterion must be considered and evaluated separately.



Pre-judging

This error occurs when you reach certain conclusions about a candidate before all observations have been made.

Because an individual starts slowly in an exercise, or does poorly in one of the early exercises, it does not necessarily follow that they will continue in this way.

Reliability is the key to evaluations. If you can observe the same behaviour over different exercises, you may be reasonably confident that your assessments are reliable (assuming you have avoided the other assessor biases). However, if

you decide early on that the candidate is of a certain calibre, what you see may be coming from your own observer set and not from the person's behaviour. Once you set yourself to thinking that this individual is a certain type, you are not observing them with an open mind or giving them a fair evaluation.

Tip: Try to avoid making final judgements until all observations have been concluded. You will then have more information to work with and will be in a better position to present a reliable and justifiable evaluation.

Content not behaviour

It is the candidate's behaviour that is assessed, not the content of the exercise.

If you are knowledgeable in an area, you may observe the content of the exercise rather than the behaviours exhibited by the participant.

Tip: Remember that exercises have content to enable the participant to exhibit behaviours and you to observe them in a 'face valid' situation.

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Projection

This refers to the tendency to rate people who are similar to you positively, and people who are different from you negatively.

If a candidate has a similar background in terms of age, education, work experience and social standing, it is tempting to look upon them as a good candidate. Conversely, if they have a different background, the temptation is to look upon them as a poor candidate. Research and experience have shown that different types of people can be successful in a given position. There is no reason to believe that, for example, there is such a thing as a specific management type.

Tip: Pay special attention to this type of bias because it often occurs without your being fully aware of it.

False values

This refers to various criteria or standards that you subjectively hold on to when evaluating other individuals.

For example, you may feel that no one can succeed as a manager unless they wear a certain style of clothing, or unless they have certain experiences, or come from a certain social class, or are a 'he'. This type of bias is closely related to projection in that these false

values often have their origin in your own characteristics.

Tip: When assessing, divorce yourself from your own beliefs. Concentrate on the candidate's behaviour. In the final summary evaluation, you will be able to discuss and clarify the overall judgements or comments you might have concerning the candidate and their ultimate chances for career success.

Stereotyping and pigeon-holing

These two assessor biases both involve subjectively categorising people into groups on the basis of certain behaviours.

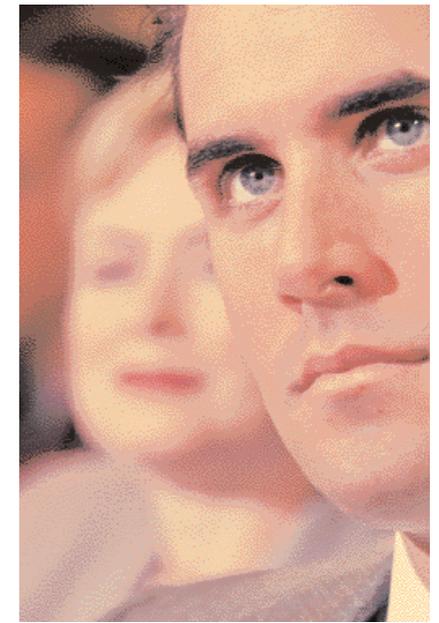
For example, 'leader', 'extrovert', 'engineer', and so on. These groups usually have a cluster of criteria associated with them, so that any individual put in such a group will tend to be assigned all the criteria, whether or not this is true.

Tip: You should try to treat and consider the candidates you observe separately, and not to label or categorise them into such groups. Categorisation, while seeming helpful and efficient, will cloud your observations and lead you to make unsubstantiated evaluations.

Central tendency (regression towards the mean)

This refers to the tendency to avoid the extremes of the rating scale and make all ratings in the middle of the scale.

While this is perfectly appropriate when an individual has performed moderately, it is not appropriate when the individual deserves either a very high or very low rating.



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Tip: When marking the middle of the scale, you may have greater confidence in your assessment since you have not really committed yourself to one extreme or the other. However, this is just as wrong as over-valuing or undervaluing a person's performance, and care should be taken to give the candidate an appropriate assessment, no matter what that might be.

Leniency and severity

A similar tendency is to be too lenient or too severe on all judgements. This tendency will lower the accuracy of an evaluation and its usefulness.

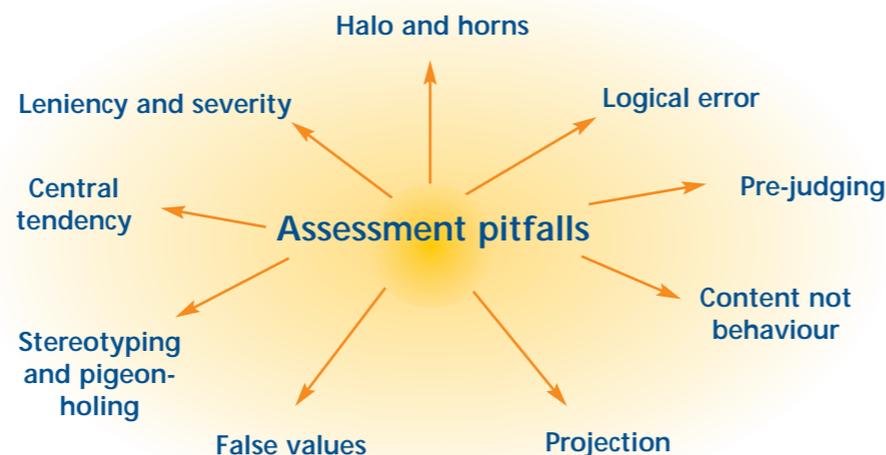


Fig. 1: Assessment pitfalls