
Assessment Center or Assassination Center— Which Kind Are You Running?

When done well, not only are assessment centers cost-effective, they also can be the most potent weapon in your staffing arsenal. But there is a very dark side to this assessment technique.

Maureen McGuire

One food industry manager abhors assessment centers, for good reason. "I wanted to promote one of my best people to a sales management position, so, following company policy I sent him to the company assessment center. After the testing was done, the center administrator told me that my candidate was 'suicidal,' 'psychologically unhealthy,' and should not be promoted. In fact, the assessment center administrator said that maybe he should be terminated."

"I felt the guy was the best person for the job, and since his past performance had been so good, I went up against the assessment center and promoted him anyway. He advanced rapidly and, to this day, still makes me proud of bucking the system."

Later the manager asked the candidate what was happening when he went through the assessment center "I found out that his wife had attempted suicide the week the man was at the assessment center," he said. "I really wondered why the assessment center didn't find out the same thing I did."

The lesson here is that assessment centers are not always right. When assessment centers make mistakes, those errors can mean the loss of promising employees as well as the very real potential for lawsuits.

This article examines where assessment centers go wrong, and notes the methodological pitfalls that even their advocates warn about.

What Are Assessment Centers?

Assessment centers are designed to measure the characteristics and skills that contribute to an employee's potential to succeed in the job being measured. They are used in virtually every industry to assess people for mid-to high-level management positions. AT&T established the first large-scale assessment center and has used it to evaluate more than 200,000 employees over the last 30 years.

The methodology of the assessment center is to first pinpoint the skills required to do the job well; second, create tests to measure those skills; third, administer the tests in groups of six to twelve employees; fourth, have at least two carefully trained assessors evaluate test results using behavioral definitions of the skills; and fifth, report the results to top management for use in promotion decisions.

The tests can be both written and oral, and job simulations and psychological tests are often used. Several tests are used to measure each

skill. Self confidence, for example, might be measured by participants' behavior in group exercises, as well as their performance in role plays. Decision-making ability might be measured by results of in-basket exercises, as well as the wisdom of participants' decisions in group problem-solving situations. Other dimensions typically tested include creativity, assertiveness, persuasiveness, resistance to stress, energy level, mental alertness, planning, organization, and administrative ability.

The principal benefit of an assessment center is that it offers the hope of an objective assessment of intangible management skills. The central problem with some center methodologies is that the individual variables don't correlate with each other. In other words, if two tests are designed to measure, say, decision-making ability, and the results of one test indicate that the person tested has strong decision-making skills, but the results of the second test indicate mediocre to poor skills, the test results don't correlate.

Are Assessment Center Results Valid?

Even the results of the grandfather of assessment centers—AT&T's center—have been challenged. The question is whether the candidates who pass actually perform better in their positions. Eric Prien, Ph.D., who has served as an expert witness for the Department of Justice in civil rights cases on employment practices, wasn't satisfied with AT&T's validation procedures.

"AT&T's study of their assessment center proved that the ratings the assessors gave the candidates correlated strongly with the ratings the candidates' supervisors gave them on the various dimensions," he said. "However, AT&T never proved scoring high on any of those dimensions showed that the candidate contributed to the company's effectiveness. So what if you get a high score in leadership? Do you make more money or produce anything else useful to your company?"

"Many companies use the dimensions and procedures derived from AT&T's research," said Prien. "They are assuming that there is a good deal of similarity across levels of management and organizations. One cannot assume that without careful analysis."

What It Means When Results Don't Correlate

Research done by Paul Sackett, Ph.D., and George Dreher, Ph.D. confirms Prien's fears. They studied assessment center results in three different organizations. The belief underlying the assessment center method is that people exhibit consistent patterns of behavior, which can be meaningfully categorized as representing a particular dimension—for instance, analytical skills. If that were true, when you examined a candidate's scores on analytical skills in an in-basket exercise, a group

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exercise, and in a role play you would find a strong correlation. But in two of the three companies they studied, Sackett and Dreher found the mean correlation across exercise ratings of individual skill dimensions was near zero.

What this means is that in those two organizations, the assessment center technique simply did not generate scores that accurately reflected the complex skills the tests claimed to be measuring. These results suggest that ratings that predict managerial success are valid only if exercises are very carefully designed.

Are “Generic Skills” a Pipe Dream?

The accepted wisdom is that management is management the world over the skills that make a good manager are the same, no matter what the organization or discipline. Prien disagrees strongly with this conclusion. He believes that the skills needed for, say, accounting and sales management are so different that generic dimensions cannot be applied equally to different managerial occupations. “I can’t fault AT&T for what they did in the 50s, because it was pioneering,” he said. “But today we have too much new information to take generic dimensions wholecloth into current assessment situations.

“For example, to compare candidates for engineering and marketing positions on the single common dimension of representational skills would be quite inappropriate. No one would argue that representational skills [skills of meeting and dealing with people under a wide variety of conditions and circumstances—some adversarial] would pertain equally to these diverse managerial jobs.” Thus, an engineering manager responsible for design procedures and a PR manager from Exxon explaining the oil spill in Alaska would require substantially different skills and levels of communication ability.

These theoretical arguments are brought down to earth in the courtroom. “Defendants in discrimination cases are much more likely to lose if a job analysis is poor or lacking,” said Prien. “A thorough and accurate job analysis is the foundation of the successful center and of avoiding litigation.”

Deep Pitfalls in Off-the-Shelf Leadership Packages

Off-the-shelf packages are very enticing. Not only are they much less expensive than customized components, but they also offer even small companies a “scientific” way to measure such things as leadership ability. The big problem with these packages is that often they measure neither the skills they are supposed to be measuring nor the skills needed to be successful in the job.

Dr. Michael Struth, vice president of Electronics Selection Systems Corp., described the danger in this way: “I cannot tell you how many times I have seen companies use the leaderless discussion group to identify leadership ability in first-line supervisors and how wrong I believe they are to do this. They buy the standard simulation off the shelf and put people together with their peers. The skill actually being tested is whether participants can exercise influence over those whom they have no formal authority. If they can, they have ‘leadership ability.’

“But think of the job of first-line supervisors. So little of the importance of the job is influencing peers. Why would anyone use this simulation to determine leadership?” Struth suggests that anyone considering an off-the-shelf leadership package critically analyze what kind of leadership it is measuring and with what parties. In other words, is the “leadership” measured relevant to the job position?

Bad Assessors Can Make Bad Assessments

Even consultants who design assessment center technology urge care in establishing the centers. John Huffy, Ph.D., an associate at Core Corporation which specializes in the development of assessment centers, believes that many centers fail because assessors are poorly trained. If assessors don’t follow standardized procedures, what is touted as a measurable test of job-related behavior becomes a totally subjective evaluation.

Every center must have at least two assessors thoroughly trained to use measures that rate clear and distinct behaviors. One catch is that it isn’t easy to locate good assessors—people who have credibility within the organization and the ability to learn dispassionate observation skills. However, skilled assessors are essential if every candidate is to experience the same process and the tests are to be truly standardized. Finding good assessors may be complicated by a company’s desire to recruit both male and female assessors who represent different racial and ethnic groups. Since litigation by candidates springs from the perception of unjust treatment or prejudice, companies may want to be sure that the candidates feel that the assessors aren’t prejudiced.

Even with all these precautions, some candidates who fail will sue. To limit the likelihood of a suit, companies should ensure that no candidate leaves a center without understanding what the final recommendations were and why it may be valuable to follow the lead of a major food chain, which allows all its candidates to try a second time after six months. In addition, the assessor, the center administrator and the participant’s supervisor provide feedback and create a developmental plan so participants can improve in areas in which they were weak before taking the second test.

Assassination Center

Companies would benefit from using judgment in who they screen. Sometimes companies send far more people through a center than they have places to fill. Those who do well can get false expectations. When the promotion they thought was “in the bag” doesn’t come, they end up leaving the company.

On the other side of the coin is the use of the assessment center to “build a case” against a difficult employee. Struth described the tendency of some managers to use the assessment center as an assassination center to get rid of people who aren’t working out, as a way of making a painful confrontation easier for the supervisor. This is an expensive and inappropriate use of the assessment center.

Conclusion

Companies that invest in assessment centers owe it to themselves and their candidates to help employees get the most out of the development experience. Companies can avoid the pitfalls of assessment centers and benefit from the savings by:

- assessing the job that is being considered.
- using caution in purchasing packaged “generic” tests.
- training assessors properly.
- having candidates leave centers with a full understanding of their results.
- helping candidates to use the center findings to develop their potential. □