The Assessment Center Process

Introduction

An Assessment Center is not a place - it is a method of evaluating candidates using standardized techniques under controlled conditions. These techniques offer a more “real-life” flavor to the selection process. An Assessment Center, moreover, is a comprehensive evaluation approach that allows candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in a number of different situations. Its primary purpose, however, is to evaluate managerial skills and abilities.

The most widespread use of an Assessment Center has been in the selection of managers and supervisors. It places the candidate in situations similar to those encountered on the job, yielding better measures of his/her managerial skills. It puts candidates through a series of group and individual exercises, interviews, and tests designed to simulate the conditions of a supervisory or managerial job and determines if they have the skills and abilities necessary to perform the job.

In order for the process to be considered an Assessment Center, it must meet certain standards adopted by the International Congress on the Assessment Center Method in The Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations (1989). Those standards include:

1. A job analysis of relevant behaviors must be conducted to determine the competencies (dimensions, attributes, characteristics, qualities, skills, abilities, motivation, knowledge) or tasks that are necessary for effective job performance and to identify what should be evaluated by the Assessment Center.
2. Behavioral observations by assessors must be classified into meaningful and relevant “competencies”, such as characteristics, aptitude, qualities, skills, abilities, knowledge, or tasks.
3. The instruments used in the Assessment Center must be designed to provide information for evaluating the competencies.
4. Multiple assessment instruments must be used. These can include tests, interviews, questionnaires, and simulations.
5. The assessment instruments must include sufficient job-related simulations to allow multiple opportunities to observe the candidate’s behavior related to each competency being assessed.
6. Multiple assessors must be used for each assesse. Consideration should be given to the demographics of the assessment panel (diversity of ethnicity, age, gender, and functional work area). A participant’s supervisor should not assess his/her employee in an Assessment Center.
7. Assessors must receive thorough training and demonstrate an understanding of the performance competencies. For the initial training of assessors who have no experience in an Assessment Center, it is desirable to have at least sixteen (16) hours of assessor training for each day of the administration of Assessment Center exercises.
8. Some systematic procedures must be used by the assessors to record accurately **specific behavioral observations** at the time of their occurrence. This might involve handwritten notes, behavioral observation scales, behavior checklist, etc. ...

9. Assessors must prepare a report of the observations made in each exercise in preparation for the integration session.

10. The integration of behavior must be based on pooling of information from assessors at a meeting among the assessors. During the integration discussion, assessors should report information from the assessment instrument, but not information irrelevant to the purpose of the assessment process. The integration should be achieved through consensus or some other method of arriving at a joint decision.

The guidelines specifically state that the following kinds of activities do not constitute an Assessment Center:

1. Panel interviews or a series of sequential interviews as the sole technique.
2. Reliance on a single technique (regardless of whether a simulation or not) as the sole basis for evaluation.
3. Using only a test battery composed of a number of pencil and paper measures, regardless of whether the judgements are made by a statistical or judgmental pooling of scores.
4. Single assessor assessment, i.e., measurement by one individual using a variety of techniques, such as pencil and paper tests, interviews, personality measures, or simulations.
5. The use of several simulations with more than one assessor where there is no pooling of data; i.e., each assessor prepares a report on performance in an exercise, and the individual reports (unintegrated) are used as the final product of the center.
6. A physical location labeled as an “Assessment Center”, which does not conform to the requirements above.

**MTAS Assessment Process**

Therefore, any MTAS Assessment Center should be accomplished using the guideline of the Assessment Center Method. Every assessment will begin with a job analysis. Competencies will be developed for each position. Multiple instruments will be used to evaluate the competencies. Multiple assessors from other cities will be used. Assessors for each MTAS Assessment Center will undergo thorough training and must be able to demonstrate an understanding of competencies and their relationship to evaluating an applicant’s performance on an assessment instrument. MTAS staff will work with assessors to integrate behavior information and prepare the final reports. The following contains a summary of the components of a “valid” Assessment Center to be used in any MTAS Assessment Center.
Job Analysis

A job analysis is a systematic collection and analysis of information about a job. It provides the foundation for the development of a number of personnel instruments, including the job description. The focus of a job analysis is on performance and the knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), and motivation needed to do the job. The primary goal of the job analysis is to provide enough information to create a model of performance and to determine causes of good and bad performance. Generally, in building the model, one would collect information about: (1) the organizational context of the job - its purpose, major responsibilities, and the environment; (2) KSAs, - tasks, behaviors, tools, processes, and products of the work; and (3) Critical Incidents - behaviors and outcomes that the organization values.

Competencies

Competencies are a new way of discussing KSAs. Job competencies are underlying characteristics of an employee (i.e., a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one’s self-image, social role, or a body of knowledge) that results in effective and/or superior job performance. Competencies are behaviors that encompass the KSAs, attitudes, motives, and temperament that distinguish excellent and poor performance. Competencies are generally expressed in performance-related terms. Competencies are the elements the assessors will be evaluating during the Assessment Center.

In the development of competencies, information from the job analysis and expert interviews is groups according to skills required to excellent performance. The intent of the grouping is to document that certain skills are judged to be necessary for the performance of the more important tasks of the job. The grouping is also useful in designing assessment center simulation exercises.

Measurements

Once the job analysis is completed, a determination must be made about the specific instruments to use to measure the desired competency. The goal is to develop exercises that simulate the skill requirements of the job. There are a number of different instruments that may be used to measure the competency of an individual. These range from pen and pencil tests to group interviews to simulations. A good practice is to chart the most important competencies and the measurement instrument that best evaluates the competency.

Simulations

A simulation is an imitation of a “real-life” experience. It can take the form of a group discussing a “real-life” problem; a role-playing setting where individuals “act out” behaviors in response to stimuli; a presentation designed to represent a work-related speech; an in-basket exercise to demonstrate how candidates make decisions about work activities or work flow; or case studies where the candidate solve real work-related problems. Here are some examples:
Leaderless Group Exercise - Leaderless Group Exercises are good tests of leadership skills. They generally fall into two distinct areas: (1) assigned roles; and (2) non assigned roles. The term “leaderless” is used because the participants carry equal status; that is, the instructions do not establish anyone as the leader of the group. The fact that the group members must work toward achieving a preestablished goal builds a situation in which leadership is needed – thus, candidates are in a situation in which they have an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills.

Role Playing (Employee Counseling) - Counseling is a very important part of a manager’s job, but it can also be the most difficult and unpleasant task the employee will have to perform. Candidates are given information about a situation involving an employee. They are instructed to interview and counsel the employee. Candidates should be able to point out the seriousness and consequences of continued behaviors.

Presentations - Candidates are required to make a speech lasting five to ten minutes on a management topic or subject area related to a particular job. The candidates are given the same topic. At the conclusion of each presentation, assessors ask questions of the candidates. Another example of the presentation might be displayed in a “press conference.” The behaviors generated by a manager during a press conference are strong indicators of the abilities of the candidate as a leader.

In-Basket - The in-basket exercise is by far the most popular exercise used in the Assessment Center process. Candidates are given a set of materials that might be found in a manager’s in-basket. Typically, the instructions for the exercise tell the candidate that he/she has just been promoted to the new position and that his/her predecessor has left a rather large amount of material in his/her in-basket. The in-basket contains memos, letters, and reports of varying importance. The candidate must write down every action he/she would take, including notes, letters, conference agenda, phone calls, etc. The in-basket scenario forces candidates to handle their in-basket as best they can, demonstrating their approach to problem-solving, decision-making, delegation, written communication skills, etc., rather than permitting them to avoid the in-basket problems by claiming they would handle them later.

Work Sample (case study) - The work sample is one of the most involved of the Assessment Center exercises. Most work samples require two (2) to three (3) hours of work by the candidate and then at least one hour interviews by the assessors. The key to success in the development of the work sample is the quality of work in the development phase. The manner in which a candidate handles a work sample is a good measure of his/her stress tolerance and, like in the in-basket, will be rated accordingly.
Tests

A test is defined as “a task or series of tasks used to obtain systematic observations presumed to be representative of educational or psychological traits or attributes.” Typically, tests require candidates to respond to items or tasks from which the examiner infers something about the attribute being measured.

**Intelligence** - The measurement of intelligence consists of administering a series of tasks (stimuli) and observing responses to them. The nature of the items determines who will pass and who will fail these tasks. Note that intelligence is not measured directly, but is inferred from the responses to the test items. Each different set of tasks may well lead to different responses and to different inferences.

**Performance** - Performance tests require the candidate to perform a task rather than answer questions. They are usually administered individually so that the examiner can count the number of errors committed by the student and can make assumptions about future performance of the candidate.

**Personality** - Personality tests attempt to measure a number of different “traits” or characteristics that individuals might possess. In principle this does not differ from testing achievement, intelligence, attitude, or any other attributes since tests are samples of behavior and are necessarily limited in content.

Interviews

The Assessment Center interview is a structured interview, meaning that all candidates are asked the same questions. Assessors, however, are free to followup on candidate responses and seek out additional information pertaining to the interview questions.

The interview questions should be related to the specific competencies being measured. The questions should be designed to illicit information about how the candidate handles certain job-related situations and to determine past behaviors in dealing with certain job-related situations. Questions should follow the following format: (1) Setup; (2) Question; (3) Follow-up. Assessors should avoid questions that call for the candidate to express opinions about issues.

Training

The subject of assessor training is given thorough coverage in *The Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations* (1989). The basic content of any assessor training program consists of teaching the trainee the following phases, concepts, and techniques: (1) how to observe and record behavior; (2) how to classify behavior into assessment competencies; and (3) how to rate (or evaluate) the behavior pertaining to each competency.
There is no set, prescribed method for conducting assessor training. However, the goal is to train assessors well enough to be able to obtain reliable and accurate assessor ratings. Assessors need to have a thorough understanding of the assessment position, including the organizational context, as well as the assessment competencies to be assessed. This includes an understanding of the kinds of behaviors that pertain to the assessment competencies. Assessors need to be skillful in recording and classifying behavior into assessment competencies. In effect, assessors need to be able to quickly identify which behaviors are relevant to the assessment process and know which competencies they pertain to.

The amount of assessor training required is not rigid but depends on issues, such as whether the trainees have had any prior similar training in assessment techniques, the background of the trainees (e.g., whether they are professionals), and their knowledge of and/or experience with the organization and the position being assessed. The precise minimum number of hours needed for adequate assessor training cannot be set; however, when training individuals with no prior assessor experience, it is desirable (not required) to have two days of training for each day of assessment.

After an individual is trained as an assessor, the individual should serve as an assessor in an Assessment Center within six months; otherwise, a refresher course should be attended before actually serving. If an individual serves as an assessor fewer than two times over two consecutive years, the individual should attend a refresher course before serving again as an assessor.

**Observing and Recording Behavior**

Assessors will observe candidates in a variety of assessment exercises. The assessor must be trained to observe candidate-behavior actively rather than passively. The behavior that assessors observe must be recorded. Assessors must write what are referred to as “behavior observation statements.” These statements should include specific, observable behaviors demonstrated by the candidate in the assessment exercise. It is crucial to train assessors to avoid making evaluations during the stage of observing and recording behavior. Thus, instead of simply sitting back and observing candidates without taking notes, assessors should be actively engaged in documenting the behavior of the candidates.

**Classifying Behavior**

The basis for rating candidates in an Assessment Center is the behavior that they demonstrate with regard to the critical assessment competency being evaluated. Thus, it is necessary to identify which behaviors are relevant to which assessment competencies. For each recorded behavior, assessor training should classify the behavior into the assessment competencies represented by the behavior.

**Rating Behavior**

After behavior has been observed and classified, it must be evaluated. Assessors must make judgements about the degree of the competency demonstrated through the behavior;
that is, they must rate the effectiveness of the behavior in terms of the competencies. It is essential that assessor ratings be consistent and reliable. Therefore, it is advisable to require that all assessor ratings be within one point where a five-point rating scale is used.

In the actual Assessment Center, assessors will evaluate all of the behaviors demonstrated with regard to each of the assessment competencies and make one single rating for the competency. The underlying basis for making such ratings, however, is an understanding of each specific behavior. Assessors must develop a common understanding about what types of behavior should be rated “3” or “5” on a rating scale.

Implementation

In a one-day assessment, it is generally feasible to administer four (4) exercises for up to twelve (12) candidates. For most managerial positions, this may include three oral exercises and one written exercise. Note that some of the competencies measured in one exercise may also be measured in another exercise.

The following represents a common one-day Assessment Center:

- **In-Basket** - The in-basket should be allocated about 90 minutes to complete.
- **Oral Presentation** - The oral presentation requires preparation time of 15-30 minutes, plus a fifteen (15) minute block of time in making the presentation and responding to assessor questions.
- **Leaderless Group** - The leaderless group discussion should take approximately 40-50 minutes.
- **Structured Interview** - The structured interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Assessors

There should be one assessor for every two candidates. During group discussion exercises, it is important that assessors have frontal views of the candidates they are assigned to observe. Assessors should seat themselves a comfortable distance from the candidates, yet close enough to hear the conversation with ease. Candidates should be specifically instructed to avoid informal discussion with assessors on breaks or in other unplanned encounters.

Following group discussion exercises, assessors should complete the Assessor Rating Form. Assessors should rank the candidates based on: (1) the quality of the ideals that they demonstrated, and (2) the overall contribution in helping the group reach its goals.
Integration

The integration session refers to the “pooling” of information and observations by assessors to determine candidate scores. There are various approaches to the integration of assessment information, but the key point is that simply “averaging” assigned ratings by different assessors does not constitute a pooling of information. The pooling and integration of information by assessors is what separates Assessment Centers from other testing procedures. Assessors share the information they have collected to develop an overall, comprehensive picture of each candidate.

The primary approach to the integration of information is based on the specific exercise, with scores assigned to each competency in each exercise. (The total score is some mathematical combination of these ratings.) Assessors who were present during the exercise should pool their information and rate the candidate (in-basket). It is important to understand that while the assessors who observed are important, the assessor who took notes on a particular candidate plays no greater role in determining that candidate’s rating than the other assessors. This ensures that the assessors work as a team to review the available information and make fair and valid ratings.

While the assessors who observed a particular candidate read his/her behavioral data, the other assessors take notes of points on which they need clarification of the candidate’s behavior. When the behavior data has been reported, the other assessors should ask questions if necessary and share any additional observations they may have made. The goal is to achieve consensus with regard to the ratings of the competencies in each exercise, which will then lead to a final rating consensus on the competencies.

Ratings

After all the reports have been read for a candidate and the ratings posted on a flip chart or blackboard, assessors should consider all available information obtained from the assessment exercises. The same 1-3 rating scale used in the exercises is used in making the final ratings. Attaining consensus on the part of the assessors, or at least achieving a set rating that has no more than a one-point spread, is the real test in the integration phase. Final ratings for each competency should be entered on the bottom line of the Final Rating Form. From the Final Rating Form, final overall scores must be assigned.