

Issue: May 2006

Contents

- ▶ Feature Article - Staff Retention - Employers should ensure that the value of their employment package is appreciated
- ▶ Feature article - Assessing Applicants - A new test for call centres
- ▶ Feature article - Assessing Applicants - Online assessment at Toyota
- ▶ Legislation and News Update - One in Four Employers Unclear Over 2007 Smoking Ban Rules
- ▶ Survey results - "Implementing Culture Change is the Biggest HR Challenge for 2006"
- ▶ White paper - From assessment to development centre: one small step or a giant leap?
- ▶ Technology - Businesses Could Be Cyber-liable for Employee's Actions
- ▶ Case Study - Radical approach to staff rosters for businesses using shift work
- ▶ Product News - New Technology Aligns Employee Performance with Tangible Business Results
- ▶ Case Study - "Does size really matter? How JCB gathered 360 Degree feedback on nearly 1000 staff in just 2 months"
- ▶ HR Management - Create your own happiness

PZ Direct Archive

- ▶ By Issue
- ▶ By Featured Organisation

Site Map

- ▶ Register
- ▶ Contact

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White paper - From assessment to development centre: one small step or a giant leap?

From assessment to development centre: one small step or a giant leap? - Part one of three

Assessment centres have been used for selection since before the Second World War and are now considered commonplace and even expected elements of any large organisation's recruitment processes.



They did not change very much until the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, a more progressive, "humane" approach to staff selection was evolving in both the UK and the US that demanded that applicants were treated more equally in the developing relationship between employer and potential employee - for example, now popular concepts like the "psychological contract" came into being at this time.



In the particular case of assessment centres, emerging best practice encouraged employers not to "do unto" but to "do in partnership with" the people invited to attend. For example, building "Lego" towers, discussing the prohibition of blood sports and other non-job-related activities gave way to realistic, organisation-based exercises designed to give applicants a real insight into the job for which they had applied - and providing feedback to candidates after the event stopped being unusual and became de rigueur. The "sheep dip" approach of the 1950s and 1960s all but disappeared as more and more organisations caught the spirit of the times.

Against this liberal 1970s background, it is perhaps not surprising that organisations soon saw the potential to run assessment centres for the *purpose* of giving feedback to *existing* employees; as a means of giving them a sense of where they stood and what they needed to do to next, so as to motivate them to seek opportunities to develop and grow. Thus in the late 80s and early 90s the development centre was born. In the intervening 20 years, development centres have come a long way and most organisations that utilise them would testify to the powerful motivational and developmental effects that can result. However, their use has not yet reached anything near the level of assessment centres and nor has organisational understanding and expertise regarding their design and implementation. Perhaps this is why we, as external experts, are often invited to advise organisations, perfectly savvy and self-sufficient in assessment centre design, when they consider implementing a "development centre" for the first time.

In our experience, many organisations' concept of a development centre is much closer to the kind of "assessment centre with feedback" of the late 80s than to a *development* centre of the early years of the 21st century. In essence what they really want is a bit of both: to retain the measurement, benchmarking and data-gathering elements of an assessment centre and to provide a motivating developmental experience for participants. Well you *can* have an "assessment & development centre", but it's a hard trick to pull-off successfully.

Take feedback, for example. On an assessment centre, any feedback that is given is after the event, when the full measure of the candidate's ability has been taken across the range of exercises that were undertaken. It is often the case that feedback is provided by an HR practitioner who may not have attended the event but who will base their comments on the assessment summaries of the assessors who were. Furthermore, the very nature of the information gathered on an assessment centre - how one's performance measured up on the day - makes the nature of the feedback similarly focused on where candidates stand now.

On a development centre, feedback and coaching are offered after each exercise, with the full intention that participants will learn as they go through the event and that they will be able to put this learning into effect immediately and so improve their performance in the next and subsequent exercises. Inevitably, therefore, this feedback is given by the observers of each exercise. The information gathered on a development centre will, of course, include an assessment of how participants measure up. But the emphasis of feedback will be on how participants can build on effective behaviour and how they can change ineffective behaviours, so as to be more effective in the future.

The provision of constructive, developmental and forward-focused feedback is a fundamentally different task, requiring qualitatively different skills to those required to make robust assessments of how a candidate performed in a given assessment centre exercise. This, at least, adds additional content to observer training, over and above that required to act as an assessor. At most it affects decisions about who will make an effective observer; those best suited to make robust assessments are not always those best equipped to provide one-to-one coaching.

In parts 2 and 3 of this article (in the next two issues of PZ Direct) we will go on to expand further on some of the core differences between assessment and development centres and explain why these make what would at first appear to be a small step, more like a giant leap.

Issue: June 2006

- ▶ Contents

- ▶ Feature Article -

- ▶ Communication at Work

- ▶ Feature Article - The

- ▶ Cost of Compliance

- ▶ Feature Article - Legal

- ▶ Compliance Drives

- ▶ Training Needs

- ▶ White Paper - From

- ▶ assessment to

- ▶ development centre: one

- ▶ small step or a giant

- ▶ leap? - Part two

- ▶ Opinion Piece - Avian

- ▶ Flu - To plan or not to

- ▶ plan, that is the question

- ▶ Legislation and News

- ▶ Update - Bosses Clamp

- ▶ Down On Worktime

- ▶ Drinking

- ▶ Case study - Email

- ▶ Efficiency Skills

- ▶ Survey Results -

- ▶ Revealed - Britain's Most

- ▶ Dangerous Job

- ▶ New HR Appointments

- ▶ Product News -

- ▶ Enhancements To The

- ▶ Portfolio Of Online Tests

- ▶ World Cup Fever - An

- ▶ employer's headache?

PZ Direct Archive

- ▶ By Issue

- ▶ By Featured

- ▶ Organisation

Site Map

- ▶ Register

- ▶ Contact

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White Paper - From assessment to development centre: one small step or a giant leap? - Part two

In the last edition, we reviewed the genesis of assessment centres and the subsequent evolution of development centres from these beginnings. We explored the first of several core differences between the two: feedback and what, when, why and by whom it is given. Here is Part 2 and later in Part 3 we will expand on some of the other core differences that make what might at first appear to be a small step from one to the other, more like a giant leap.



The amount of and way in which data are kept is one such significant difference, arising from the underlying question, "why is the centre being done?" In the case of assessment centres, they are run primarily for the benefit of the organisation, so that decisions can be made about individuals. Not least to comply with employment law, all data, both qualitative (assessors' exercise summaries, summary reports etc.) and quantitative (exercise ratings, psychometric test results etc.) are kept on file. Access may well be granted to third parties, if the request is in line with Data Protection Act and in line with organisational policies. For example, potential new line managers may be given access to candidates' files when considering their suitability for other roles.



In the case development centres, they are run primarily and sometimes exclusively for the benefit of the individual participants; the benefits to the employing organisation (increased effectiveness, productivity etc.) are positive and expected by-

products of participants' growth. At its purest developmental level, the only document of any real importance is the personal development plan that participants draw up at the end of the centre. It is this and only this document that is placed on file and access is often restricted only to HR and learning & development personnel who will support participants' development going forward. All other centre documents and data produced by the observers are destroyed, their purpose - providing participants with information to help them decide on future development needs and plans - having been served. Where a new, genuinely development centre has been launched to replace a more assessment centre process, we have even performed a "before your very eyes" public shredding of all the documents at the end of the centre, so as to counter any cynicism or anxiety about what *really* happens to the data.

However, more common than the most pure development centre data policy described above is one where limited data are retained, perhaps just the observers' summary reports and the participants' development plans. Access to these data might well be restricted to HR and learning & development personnel and to participants' line managers, all of whom would be actively involved in supporting participants' ongoing development.

The type of data that are collected is another significant difference between assessment and development centres. In the case of assessment centres it is essential to have some form of rating scale, so as to be able to determine candidates relative strengths and standing *between* each-other and to be able to select the very best candidates.

For development centres, ratings are much less relevant and may actually be detrimental to the development process. What is most helpful to individual participants are the behavioural descriptions of relative strengths and development needs *within* the individual. Where ratings are provided, it can be that participants focus on these at the expense of exploring the behavioural descriptions of what they did well and how they might improve in future.

Similarly, most assessment and development centres include some form of psychometric test. These tools can provide very useful, truly objective data to supplement that which is collected by assessors and observers. However, here too the differing underlying purpose for the centres affects the type of psychometric test that might be suitable.

In the case of assessment centres, the organisation often wants to take a measure of candidates' intellectual horsepower or "smarts" and therefore some form of ability test - most commonly some form of numerical and/or verbal reasoning test - is included. The rationale for doing so has been proven time and time again over decades of research; psychometric tests of ability often outdo any other assessment methodology in terms of their power to predict future job success.

However, in the case of development centres, run primarily for the benefit of the individual participants, ability tests of the sort described above are neither useful nor appropriate. This is because there is very limited potential for participants to further develop the qualities measured by these instruments. In essence, if one is found not to have "smarts", there is little one can do to develop them. It might therefore be more appropriate to choose personality questionnaires and/or measures of job-relevant management skills and styles. Then, if one were found to be lacking in "team management" skills, for example, there is much that one can do to develop these skills.

In Part 3 of this article, we will go on to explore some of the practical and logistical differences between assessment and development centres.

Issue: July 2006

▶ Contents

▶ Feature Article - Career Planning

▶ Feature Article - White Paper - Organisational Development

▶ Feature Article - Recruitment - Poor Communication Risk

▶ Change Management - Five Reasons for Employee Lack of Commitment

▶ White Paper - From assessment to development centre: one small step or a giant leap? - Part three

▶ Survey Results - Employers may be leaving the door open to internal espionage

▶ Case Study - Employees before customers and other revolutions

▶ News Update - Majority of companies remain clueless about cost of absence

▶ Company News

▶ New HR Appointments

▶ Exhibition Preview - WOLCE 2007

PZ Direct Archive

▶ By Issue

▶ By Featured Organisation

Site Map

▶ Register

▶ Contact

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White Paper - From assessment to development centre: one small step or a giant leap? - Part three

In the previous two editions, we reviewed the evolution of development centres from their assessment centre beginnings and explored several core differences between the two: feedback (what, when, why and by who it is given); data policy (what type of centre data is retained and who has access to it); the type of data that is gathered (assessor ratings versus observer behavioural descriptions of relative strengths and development needs); and psychometric tests (the suitability of ability tests for assessment but not for development centres). In this last part we will explore three more core differences and how these, together with those already described, add up to a much more significant difference between the two than might at first appear.

Firstly, an assessment centre is an inherently competitive event where the ultimate aim is to identify from a large number of candidates those few whose performance excels. Within the context of employment legislation, great care must be taken to ensure that no candidate gains an unfair advantage over others. Therefore, for example, the centres are designed and carefully managed to keep candidates from any form of information and knowledge sharing that might affect candidates' performance in later exercises. Even where candidates are left free to share knowledge, few candidates are willing to do so as they recognise that they may be giving away a competitive advantage and therefore reducing their own chances of succeeding over others. Some candidates may even be tempted to mis-inform others.

In contrast, the aim of a development centre is for every participant to learn and develop to the fullest possible extent during the event. There is no sense in which, by sharing knowledge, participants diminish their chances of succeeding. In this narrow respect, "success" on a development centre is more a question of individuals showing more strengths than development needs rather than is showing greater strengths than other participants. Consequently, many development centres are designed to reflect real-life organisational co-operation and information sharing. Participants might therefore be given explicit "permission" and encouragement to chat with each-other during breaks about information they have gleaned from the exercises or knowledge that they have that would be beneficial to performance in subsequent exercises. Similarly, there may be formal information sharing sessions timetabled into the development centre, with a brief explaining what type of information to share and why it will be beneficial.

Who takes responsibility for assessment and evaluation of candidates' or participants' performance is another differentiator. On an assessment centre, responsibility for assessment lies squarely with the assessors. Though candidates may be asked to do some form of self-assessment, in the competitive context of an assessment centre, this information cannot be considered reliable and it therefore would not be appropriate to give it any weight in the overall evaluation process. Again due to the competitive context, any form of peer feedback must be considered inappropriate and, if it were gathered, highly unreliable.

Participants attending a development centre are expected to gain insight into and acceptance of their own relative strengths and development needs and then to make a personal commitment to plan and then take actions that will build on the former and address the latter. Such commitment and the personal resources required to take action are only likely to materialise if participants take ownership of and internalise the insights they have gained and the conclusions they have drawn. This ownership and internalisation is far more likely to occur if participants themselves take a degree of responsibility for self-assessment and for drawing conclusions about their own strengths and development needs. Therefore it is quite common for participants and their observers to come together towards the end of the centre to share their observations and conclusions and jointly discuss what and how the participant might best move forward after the event.

The final differentiator to consider here is logistical, concerning the duration of assessment and development centres. An assessment centre can be designed to take candidates through a rigorous suite of four exercises, an interview and psychometric tests in a day or, at most, a day and a half, after which candidates leave and await their letter of acceptance or rejection in the post or by e-mail some time later. Assessors may be required to remain for some form of final summary of candidates' performance and for some form of assessor conference or wash-up but this may still be included in one (very long) day.

A development centre comprising the same number of exercises and tests cannot be squeezed into the same time slot. As discussed in this and earlier parts of this paper, development centres have additional elements that require additional time. These elements include time for immediate post-exercise one-to-one feedback; time for participants and for observers to pull their observations together into some form of centre summary of strengths and development needs; time for participants and observers to come together to discuss summary conclusions and development opportunities; and time for participants to draw up development plans. Cumulatively, these elements may extend what would be a one-day assessment centre to a two or two-and-a-half day development centre.

Furthermore, a development centre is only one element of participants' continuous development and, to work well, should not be seen as an isolated event. Often, therefore, the development centre is embedded into participants' working life by formal pre-centre work and formal follow-ups post centre. For example, participants may be asked to undertake some form of in-job assessment of their current strengths and development needs, such as 360 degree feedback or line managers' report. They can use such information as a set of working hypotheses about strengths and development needs that they can test out during the centre. Similarly, to provide participants with the greatest chance of succeeding with their development plans, it is useful to provide a formal link after the centre from participants' observers to their line managers. This handover allows for the observer and participants to put conclusions about participants' strengths and development needs into context and to make explicit how line managers can support development.

We hope that this paper has helped to clarify some of the reasons why, though they share elements of methodological heritage, development centres in the twenty-first century have evolved to the extent that they are now a species in their own right.

Amanda White & Russell Drakeley
CGR Business Psychologists Ltd