

## **A HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT CENTRES**

### **The use of Assessment Centres in the UK**

We can trace the existence of assessment centres back to 1942 when they were used by War Office Selection Boards (Anstey, 1989). Their introduction stemmed from the fact that the existing system was resulting in a large proportion of those officers it had predicted would be successful being 'returned to unit' as unsuitable. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the system as it was relied on interviewing to select officers and had as selection criteria things like social and educational background. Even the criteria of 'achievement in the ranks' which one might imagine as being more job relevant included things like 'exceptional smartness'. No wonder unsuitable people were chosen as officers and potentially excellent officers overlooked. The assessment centre approach subsequently adopted was an attempt to accurately elicit the types of behaviour that an officer was required to display in order to be successful in their job. The tasks included leaderless group exercises, selection tests and individual interviews by a senior officer, junior officer and psychiatrist respectively. This new system resulted in a substantial drop in the proportion of officers being 'returned to unit' as unfit for duty. During the post war years this system was so successful that it was introduced for selection to the Civil Service and a variation of it is still used for officer selection in the armed forces to this day.

### **The use of Assessment Centres in the US**

In the United States assessment centres were initially used by the Office of Strategic Studies to select spies during the Second World War. Subsequently the use of assessment centres was taken up by the private sector, especially the giant American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) which began using assessment centres for management selection in 1956, as well as Standard Oil Ohio, IBM, Sears and General Electric. There were differences between the US and UK approaches which largely stemmed from the original background to their introduction. In the UK a greater emphasis was placed on group exercises with an appointed leader, group discussions and long written exercises whereas in the US more emphasis was placed on in-tray exercises, leaderless group exercises with assigned roles and two person role plays (Woodruffe, 1993).

### **The use of Assessment Centres in Industry**

Modern assessment centres in the UK tend now to follow the American format although there are still some which have their roots in the public sector Civil Service model. The growth of the use of assessment centres in the UK has been rapid. In 1986 Robertson and Makin reported that slightly more than one quarter of organisations who employed 500 people or more used assessment centres, in 1989 Mabey reported that more than one third of companies employing over 1000 people used them while most recently Boyle et al (1993)

reported that 45% of organisations who responded used assessment centres and that their use was more prevalent in the private sector and by larger organisations. We have also seen a rise in the use of what we could term 'pure' development centres. The main reasons behind this have been the realisation that centres that have an element of selection decision making to them can have a demoralising effect on those individuals who have been deemed unsuccessful. Organisations have also come to realise that to be competitive they must constantly invest in the development of their staff in order to enable them to respond effectively to an increasingly uncertain marketplace. This has meant that rather than selecting new employees organisations are now investing more in their existing workforce. Traditionally companies who wished to train their staff would send them on a training course external to the organisation, indeed many still do, but there has been an increasing emphasis placed on delivering training that is relevant to the organisation's needs and business objectives. A development centre run as part of an integrated training strategy is an excellent way of ensuring that training is carried out in a context of organisational relevance. A final reason for the growth in use of development centres has been the widespread adoption of the idea of behavioural competencies in the human resource field; because development centres are designed around the job simulation format, which requires the participant to actively do something, they are a naturally effective way of assessing competencies in individuals.

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