

WHAT IS AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE ?

The term assessment centre does not refer to a physical place, instead it describes an approach. Traditionally an assessment centre consisted of a suite of exercises designed to assess a set of personal characteristics; it was seen as a rather formal process where the individuals being assessed had the results fed back to them in the context of a simple yes/no selection decision. However, recently we have seen a definite shift in thinking away from this traditional view of an assessment centre to one which stresses the developmental aspect of assessment. A consequence of this is that today it is very rare to come across an assessment centre which does not have at least some developmental aspect to it, increasingly assessment centres are stressing a collaborative approach which involves the individual actively participating in the process rather than being a passive recipient of it. In some cases we can even find assessment centres that are so developmental in their approach that most of the assessment work done is carried out by the participants themselves and the major function of the centre is to provide the participants with feedback that is as much developmental as judgmental in nature.

Assessment centres typically involve the participants completing a range of exercises which simulate the activities carried out in the target job. Various combinations of these exercises and sometimes other assessment methods like psychometric testing and interviews are used to assess particular competencies in individuals. The theory behind this is that if one wishes to predict future job performance then the best way of doing this is to get the individual to carry out a set of tasks which accurately sample those required in the job and are as similar to them as possible. The particular competencies used will depend upon the target job but one will often find competencies such as relating to people; resistance to stress; planning and organising; motivation; adaptability and flexibility; problem solving; leadership; communication; decision making and initiative. There are numerous possible competencies and the ones which are relevant to a particular job are determined through job analysis.

The fact that a set of exercises is used demonstrates one crucial characteristic of an assessment centre - namely that it is behaviour that is being observed and measured. This represents a significant departure from many traditional selection approaches which rely on the observer or selector attempting to infer personal characteristics from behaviour based upon subjective judgement and usually precious little evidence. This approach is rendered unfair and inaccurate by the subjective whims and biases of the selector and in many cases produces a selection decision based on a freewheeling social interaction after which a decision was made as whether the individual's 'face fit' with the organisation.

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