Assessment Centers for Public Safety Agencies
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What is an Assessment Center?

The assessment center, as we know it, began in Germany in the 1930s. German military psychologists believed that traditional paper-and-pencil tests captured only a narrow view of promotional candidates.

To remedy this, the Germans built complex scenarios and then rated candidates on the behaviors they demonstrated in each scenario. The American and British militaries picked up on the idea and began testing programs of their own in the 1940s in order to recruit spies for the war effort.

The U.S. Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), took recruits to a secret, rural location known as Station S, where they participated in a series of exercises designed to elicit behaviors upon which they would be rated by a panel of observers. The recruits were instructed to develop cover stories to hide their true identities from assessors, and, throughout the process, they encountered scenarios that tested their cover stories and enticed them to reveal their identities. The recruits’ ability to maintain their cover in high-stress situations provided the assessors with additional insight into each recruit’s potential as a spy.

The first industrial application of the assessment center process was the Management Progress Study developed at AT&T in 1956. This study, initially involving more than 400 managers, demonstrated that the assessment center method could successfully predict a manager’s job success after several years on the job. Soon after, assessment centers were being used by many large American companies, such as IBM, General Electric, Sears and Standard Oil.

So, what exactly is an assessment center? To candidates everywhere, the words “assessment center” conjure an image of an ominous testing facility. In truth, an assessment center is not a place, but rather a tool for identifying the degree of behavior that will lead to success in a given role. More specifically, an assessment center is a standardized tool for evaluating behavior through a series of exercises that simulate real-life job tasks or situations. The candidates’ responses to the exercises are evaluated by trained assessors who observe, record, classify and rate the candidates’ observable behaviors against valid and objective scoring criteria. An easy way to think about assessment centers is that they are a series of exercises that are standardized and rated by experts.
How Do Assessment Centers Benefit Public Safety Agencies?

Public safety agencies hold a unique position in our society. Employees of these agencies serve and protect the communities in which they work; this often involves risking their own health and safety for the benefit of others.

For this reason, it is imperative that individuals promoted through the ranks are able to provide guidance and protection to the individuals with whom they work, as well as to the communities they serve. Historically, these leaders have been hand-selected by their agency’s administration (or another appointed figure); however, this has not always resulted in successful leadership within the agency. In order to make stronger selection decisions, testing processes have been utilized more and more for public safety agencies. While there are many types of examination processes, such as written examinations or structured interviews, assessment centers provide the most benefit in identifying the leadership talent required to manage individuals safely and successfully.

**RELIABLE AND VALID PREDICTIONS ABOUT PERFORMANCE**

Assessment centers have existed in one form or another for more than 80 years. In that time, considerable research has been done to answer the question of how effective they are at predicting job success. To quantify how well an assessment center predicts a person’s performance, researchers use a concept called validity. Validity is a statistical representation of how well a measure of something (i.e., an assessment center) corresponds to the real world. In the case of assessment centers, validity helps to establish that the exercises are collectively measuring what they are designed to measure. For this reason, validity evidence is important for establishing legal defensibility.

Across 50 different studies of assessment center validity (Gaugler, et al., 1987), research collectively indicated that assessment centers accurately and reliably predicted numerous job success dimensions. In fact, the research on assessment centers has shown that they outperform years of education, biographical data, reference checks, years of experience, age and conscientiousness in their ability to predict job success.

The historical track record of assessment centers’ predictive power does not mean that all assessment centers can be assumed to be equally strong predictors. Much of the predictive ability of an assessment center comes down to being well-designed and well-implemented. In order to be effective, each assessment center must be built and tailored specifically to the job it is intended to represent. This process of building and customizing must follow an extensive list of steps to in order to meet standards of quality and to provide effective, relevant predictions. Moreover, the implementation of an assessment center must be executed with a careful attention to detail so as to prevent the contamination of results with elements unrelated to the job.
POSITIVE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCES
Candidates tend to view assessment centers as more realistic and more representative of the job than other selection tools, such as cognitive ability tests (e.g., multiple-choice written examinations), personality tests or interviews. This is because candidates have opportunities to demonstrate behaviors that are directly related to the job through exercises that represent the required tasks of the job. As a result, candidates tend to be more satisfied with assessment centers compared to other selection processes.

An additional benefit to assessment centers is that the assessment itself serves as a job preview, which allows candidates to evaluate the potential fit of the position in advance of a selection decision. This additional point of information enables candidates to be more comfortable in accepting the position and may lead to a reduced risk of turnover, greater engagement and a better understanding of the responsibilities needed to perform in the position. For this reason, assessment centers may also serve as a valuable tool for selecting candidates for entry-level positions.

Positive candidate experiences tend to lead to a reduction in grievances or challenges. Well-implemented assessment centers place a strong emphasis on the seamless standardization of the candidate experience, which eliminates the perception that some candidates are provided an unfair advantage or disadvantage. Coupled with the clear job-related nature of an assessment center, this creates fewer opportunities for a misstep in the process that may lead to a grievance or challenge being filed.

FAIRNESS
Fairness in employment is a concept covered by federal protections under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex and religion in regard to employment decisions. Specifically, hiring and promotion practices are included, and employers are encouraged to adopt “best practices” to reduce discrimination whenever possible. This is an important area in which assessment centers provide an advantage. With careful design and implementation, an assessment center naturally preempts a wide range of potentially discriminatory elements.

A principle concern with any assessment tool is whether it demonstrates any form of disparate impact toward minorities and protected groups. While other traditional selection tools, such as written examinations, may demonstrate a strong predictive capability, they also tend to have a high degree of adverse impact toward certain minority groups. In contrast, research on assessment centers has demonstrated that the differential performance of ethnic groups is significantly less. For example, there are minimal differences in the performance of Caucasian and African-American individuals. Fairness in assessment centers is a product of the focus on behavioral observation and strong linkages of those behaviors to job success. Fairness in assessment centers is further enhanced by a rigorous training initiative for assessors in which potential forms of bias are identified and minimized.

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PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK
Assessment centers generate a significant amount of information about candidates. While this information is typically put to use in making selection and promotional decisions, it can also be used to provide developmental insights. This is particularly valuable to public safety agencies where a significant investment is made in individual employees and the retention of those employees is a key concern. The use of assessment center results provides insight regarding developmental opportunities for employees, which creates an avenue for growth for those who are not selected for promotion. This practice also has advantages for agencies with a large number of candidates competing for a limited number of jobs. Performance feedback is a transparent demonstration of the outcomes of the promotional process and may help to ease tension regarding limited promotional opportunities.

LEGAL DEFENSIBILITY
A key concern with any hiring or promotional practice is the ability to be defensible in the event of litigation. Defending against litigation is an expensive process and places a heavy demand on agency resources. Additionally, litigation places a significant burden on agency leadership and administrative personnel by directing their time and attention away from core operations. These costs are incurred simply to defend against a claim; additional costs may be incurred in the form of awards to aggrieved parties. Data reported in 2016 by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) showed 91,503 total charges filed against employers with the majority of charges filed due to discrimination on the basis of race (35.3%) and sex (29.4%). The EEOC also reports winning over $50 million in damages for aggrieved parties in 2016.

If DOJ finds reason to believe that a pattern of violations is occurring, a consent decree may be put in place with the agency. A consent decree is a legally binding agreement that lasts for a specified period of time and mandates training, investigation and policy reviews overseen by DOJ. Both litigation and consent decrees are outcomes that can be prevented with careful planning and adoption of best practices.

There are a few specific steps that can be taken to minimize susceptibility to litigation. First, candidates should be informed about what their participation in the process entails. Generally, this takes the form of an orientation session during which candidates are informed of what is being measured and what the process is like. Second, candidates should be given feedback about their performance. Transparency in the process is key to promoting both the ethical conduct of an assessment center and a positive reflection on the process from candidates. Lastly, candidate consent should be attained for any use of assessment center data beyond the original purpose.

While minimizing susceptibility to litigation is important, being able to defend in the event of litigation is also a major consideration. Creating defensibility in selection procedures is a technical process that involves demonstrating that an instrument is a valid predictor and that it does not unfairly discriminate. Much of the legal defensibility of assessment centers hinges on the question of how job-related the exercises and scoring criteria are. A well-designed assessment center includes processes that establish that the behaviors assessed are directly related to the rank for which candidates are testing. The following section provides additional information regarding the elements that an assessment center should include. Many of these elements are established best practices that exist to provide the solid ground needed to successfully defend against litigation.
What Elements are Required for a Well-designed Assessment Center?

In order to be considered an assessment center and to gain the benefits discussed so far, there are certain elements that must be included in the development and administration. Collectively, the elements of an assessment center combine to create a process that is methodologically sound, effective at predicting performance and defensible under legal scrutiny.

**Assessment Center Elements**
- Job analysis
- Subject matter experts
- Multiple exercises
- Candidate preparation
- Expert assessors
- Systematic scoring
- Standardized administration
- Results
- Feedback

**Job Analysis**
Job analysis forms the foundation of the assessment process because it clearly establishes the elements of the job that are being tested. Specifically, the tasks and knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) of a job are identified in a job analysis. The most important tasks are used for the development of exercises, and the KSAOs are used to develop behavioral dimensions to serve as scoring criteria. This is a critical process because it serves to establish the job-relatedness and content validity of the assessment center.

Content validity refers to how well a test measures what it is intended to measure. This concept directly relates to how legally defensible an assessment center is. In order to be considered legitimate, any selection tool, including assessment centers, must demonstrate that it is a valid predictor of the outcome it claims to measure. The process for establishing content validity must adhere to a specific set of guidelines (i.e., The Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures, 1978), and a part of that process includes the completion of a job analysis. If a job analysis is not conducted, then the assessment center is not considered valid and may be vulnerable to litigation.
What Elements are Required for a Well-designed Assessment Center? (cont.)

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

Subject matter experts (SMEs) are individuals with extensive specialized knowledge about the rank and agency for which the assessment center is being designed. Typically, these individuals are current or former incumbents, in positions at or above the rank being assessed, and employed within the same agency developing the assessment center. SMEs participate in the development process at numerous points by contributing their expertise and perspective.

The involvement of SMEs begins with the job analysis element. SMEs assist in the development of the initial list of task and KSAO statements and later providing a thorough review of the job analysis data. Collectively, the contribution of SMEs to the job analysis process is critical for establishing the content validity of the assessment center by directly linking an expert level of knowledge about the rank to the actual content of the assessment center.

SMEs also assist with creating ideas for assessment center exercises. They provide insight on the exercise content that would be the most appropriate for current agency needs. In this way, SMEs help to ensure that the content of the assessment center is a realistic fit for the agency. Once exercises are developed, SMEs lend their expertise by reviewing all of the assessment center materials to verify the content is accurate and appropriate for the rank and agency.

Other characteristics generally refer to personal attributes that are not learned, psychomotor or cognitive in nature. Examples include personality traits, motivations and orientations/propensities, such as customer service orientation.

MULTIPLE EXERCISES

Assessment centers contain multiple exercises, all of which are behavioral simulations. Examples of these exercises include tactical scenarios, role-plays, in-baskets, presentations, etc. This provides an advantage to assessment centers over other selection methods that may rely on only one type of exercise. Utilizing multiple exercises allows candidates to demonstrate their abilities in different situations, all of which are components of the job. This helps to ensure that both candidate strengths and opportunities for improvement are identified and that a more robust prediction of a candidate’s future performance can be made.

CANDIDATE PREPARATION

Prior to the administration of the assessment center, it is best practice to provide candidates with an orientation session(s) in order to communicate information about the process. This session should include information regarding what an assessment center is, the types of exercises the candidates will experience, the dimensions against which the candidates will be assessed and logistics, such as dates/times, what to wear, what to bring, etc. During this session, candidates also have an opportunity to ask general questions about the process and receive guidance regarding what behavior is expected and how to perform their best. It is recommended that candidates are provided a written guide containing this information, as well.
An additional component of assessor training focuses on agency-specific elements. Assessors must be trained on the logistics of the exercises, administration expectations, potential candidate responses and any agency policies and procedures that influence rating criteria. To facilitate this aspect of training, assessors meet with SMEs to ask questions and clarify the intent of the exercises. Functionally, the interaction of SMEs and assessors creates a clear continuum of communication between agency-specific experts and those responsible for evaluating the candidates.

**SYSTEMATIC SCORING**

Often this process utilizes note-taking, behavioral checklists and/or behaviorally-anchored rating scales. Typically, assessors utilize this standardized process to guide the development of their individual ratings of the candidate. After the assessors have individually scored a candidate, they integrate their ratings to reach a final score. This process also serves to link individual candidate scores to the behavioral dimensions (based on the job analysis data for the rank), which is an important supplement to legal defensibility.
What Elements are Required for a Well-designed Assessment Center? (cont.)

STANDARDIZED ADMINISTRATION
The administration of the assessment center is one of the most crucial elements and encompasses the majority of the candidate experience. It is the singular point at which all of the data on candidates will be collected, and, for this reason, must be executed with meticulous care. Candidates must have the same opportunities to demonstrate relevant behaviors in each of the assessment center exercises. To this end, the administration of the assessment center must be standardized in order to deliver a consistent candidate experience. Instructions to candidates should be scripted, time allowed for exercises must be regulated, materials available must be controlled, facilities and rooms used during the assessment center must be consistent and appropriately accommodated, the behavior of role players must be scripted and as consistent as possible, questions asked by assessors must be the same, etc. Going the extra mile to ensure a consistent delivery for each candidate will preempt grievances and fairness disputes down the road.

RESULTS
After the delivery of the assessment center, individual candidate results should be compiled into a final format. Great care must be taken in the transferring of scores to prevent any loss, mistakes or corruption of the data. Generally, it is best practice to triple-check the accuracy of scores prior to delivery to candidates. It is important that scores are posted for candidates as soon as possible following the conclusion of the assessment center. Doing this will alleviate some of the anxiety candidates feel when they have to wait too long for results, expedite the process of making promotions and prevent candidates from believing information is being manipulated.

FEEDBACK
A unique advantage of assessment centers is the breadth and depth of candidate information that is gathered. Rather than, for example, a multiple-choice examination that has right or wrong answers only, an assessment center allows for a range of performance on each exercise. While the principle purpose of the resultant data may be for selection or promotional decisions, there is an opportunity to leverage the data for both individual and agency development.

Candidates should receive individual feedback reports that identify the areas in which they demonstrated strengths as well as opportunities for development. This is useful for individuals who wish to work toward improving their current performance and becoming a stronger candidate for future promotional opportunities.

As a result of an assessment center, agencies also receive meaningful feedback about their candidate pool, which can be used to identify agency trends. Well-designed assessment centers will conclude with a debrief session during which assessors and agency stakeholders can discuss the collective observations about the candidates from the assessment center process. This can be useful for identifying agency-wide training needs and for generating the support needed to undertake initiatives to address those needs. Since the exercises are designed to simulate real-life situations that candidates may encounter on the job, any improvement in those abilities represents a direct benefit to the agency.
Develop in-house or outsource?

The benefits of an assessment center can only be realized if the methodology of development is rigorous, exercises are soundly-designed and job-related, assessors are carefully selected and appropriately trained, attention to detail is paid to the administration of the process and results are compiled in a thoughtful manner. This process can be done in-house, but requires a high degree of technical expertise.

There are some advantages to developing an assessment center in-house. Internal consultants will have precise knowledge of the interior of their agency. This can enable developers to deftly navigate internal policies, readily identify key resources and streamline communication. Additionally, agencies may also decide to pursue internal development due to cost considerations, believing that an in-house assessment center would be more cost-effective than outsourcing.

Partnering with an outside vendor comes with an additional set of advantages. Due to the complexity of assessment center development and administration, the process can demand a significant amount of staff time, which, ultimately, costs the agency money. For agencies that do not have personnel with previous experience developing assessment centers, there can be a substantial learning period that further exacerbates the cost of staff time.

A knowledgeable and capable external consulting firm can streamline the development process and ensure that the administration runs smoothly. Agencies can hand off many responsibilities in order to free up internal resources to focus on core operations. In addition to handling the project work, an outside vendor may also be better suited to establish a perception of objectivity, since an outside party would be less susceptible to internal political influences.

Most importantly, outsourcing to a reputable consulting firm provides the ability to call on expert resources from consulting partners to defend against litigation. Facing litigation can be daunting, particularly for an agency that has not previously done so and does not have resources in place. Outsourcing to a knowledgeable consulting firm that is capable of developing and administering legally defensible assessment centers and standing behind them can provide valuable peace of mind.
What are the Benefits of a CPS HR Consulting Assessment Center?

Assessment centers identify the best candidates; yet, assessment centers are also complex undertakings with many moving parts. Ensuring those parts move in sync can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Assessment centers offer numerous advantages over other testing and selection methods, including a powerful predictive ability and a minimal impact of bias against candidates.

Moreover, carefully designed and implemented assessment centers have the advantage of being legally defensible. While these advantages are powerful, they are realized only when the methodologies involved in the assessment center process are sound. Having a knowledgeable and capable consulting partner to help navigate the process makes a world of difference in the value that the assessment center delivers.

Due to our extensive knowledge of and experience with promotional processes, as well as our understanding of the needs of public safety agencies, CPS HR Consulting (CPS HR) is uniquely qualified to meet the challenge of developing and administering assessment centers. We professionally tailor each assessment center to specifically meet agency and position needs. Our professional consultants have acquired expertise in assessments from a long history of delivering quality assessment consulting services to our clients. We understand each step of the process, from job analysis to documentation and delivery – and how to ensure a defensible and predictive product. Best of all, we understand both the challenges and opportunities of working with public safety agencies because we focus exclusively on the public sector.

About CPS HR Consulting

*CPS HR Consulting* is a self-supporting public agency providing a full range of integrated HR solutions to government and nonprofit clients across the country. Our strategic approach to increasing the effectiveness of human resources results in improved organizational performance for our clients. We have a deep expertise and unmatched perspective in guiding our clients in the areas of organizational strategy, recruitment and selection, classification and compensation and training and development.

To learn more about CPS HR assessment centers, reach out to us at:

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