

# Centre stage

Assessment and development centres are powerful techniques that will help you recruit and retain the best employees—but they should be used with care. Teresa Callow puts the spotlight on seven key defining factors that will ensure success.

**A**ssessment and development centres have a direct impact upon an organisation's profitability through a substantial improvement in the quality of hiring and talent identification decisions. Employers already reaping such benefits stand to maximise their investment even more by following some simple steps assured to further optimise the success of these selection processes. This article provides an overview of the purpose and benefits of assessment centres and the seven key defining factors for their success.


Assessment or development centres are situations where a group of participants undertake an integrated programme of activities and simulated exercises designed to generate behaviour similar to that required for success in a target job or job level. Participants are observed by a team of trained assessors who evaluate each individual against a number of job-related behaviours. Decisions are then made by pooling the shared data, which significantly increases objectivity.

Employers' increased use of this approach is due to its proven success in predicting someone's performance when their previous experience lacks relevance to the job in question. Hence its popularity in graduate recruitment and identifying people with high potential. Put simply, assessment centres help employers reduce the risk and costs of employing the wrong people.

A wealth of research demonstrates the validity of assessment centre findings. For example, one of AT&T's studies compared 40 employees promoted through the use of assessment centres with 40 who had been selected by other means. They discovered that two-thirds of the former group were rated above satisfactory in their job performance versus only one-third selected by other means. With research estimating differences in employee performance to be worth 30 percent of a role's annual salary, this increase in selection quality has substantial implications for profitability.

There are also significant benefits to the participant:

- As everything is standardised, everyone has the same opportunity to show their ability on the same basis;
- The process is far more objective than a one-to-one interview, which depends entirely on one person's interpretation;
- It is fair! Assessment centres allow participants to show a range of abilities in various situations. A participant's ability across all of these situations is taken into account in the final rating.


 Three individuals, two men and one woman, are shown from the chest up, wearing red robes. They are positioned in a way that suggests they are looking towards the camera. The man at the top left is balding with a friendly expression. The woman in the middle has blonde hair and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The woman at the bottom left has dark hair and is also smiling. The background is dark, making the red robes stand out.
 

Assessment and development centres primarily differ in their purpose, although from the participant's perspective they will appear much the same. Assessment centres are generally used to make recruitment and selection decisions. Development centres are used to help facilitate an individual's professional development.

Assessment centres are a familiar and commonly utilised technique, yet the use of development centres is not as widespread. This is likely to change as they provide a situation in which people can most constructively focus upon identifying and developing those skills directly related to career progression. A properly designed development centre may be one of the most valuable development experiences of an employee's career.

In essence, both types of centre use the same methodology but with different purposes.

Assessment centres are used for selection, external recruitment, and internal promotion (usually constituting the end of process), while development centres are used for identifying 'fast track' potential, and diagnosing job-related strengths and weaknesses (usually representing the start of process).

#### **The seven key defining factors of assessment centre success**

**Success Factor 1: Developing an assessment centre policy statement.** Once the need for an assessment centre has been identified, the organiser must obtain commitment to the process from the other individuals in the organisation. This is especially true for senior management and the board. Following this, a policy statement should be issued. This should outline the purpose of the centre, who the event is targeted at, who the assessors will be, how the results will be used, and the type of feedback that will be given.

**Success Factor 2: Understanding the target job.** Often jobs need to be filled in a hurry and time spent on job analysis can seem like a luxury when the pressure

is on to get started. However, a thorough understanding of the job requirements is vital to design an appropriate process. This information is best gained by interviewing those already in the post to establish what types of things happen in a typical day, who the job holders interact with, and in what way. Interviews with line managers are also useful and should focus on identifying the key differences between average and outstanding performers. Ideally, narrow your list of competencies down to six or eight which make the biggest difference to performance.

**Success Factor 3: Select your materials.** Once you understand the job, you can choose appropriate materials to design your centre. Try to assess each competency more than once (ideally three times). This reduces the risk of making an incorrect judgement based on a single uncharacteristic performance. Exercise simulations provide an opportunity to gather evidence on how well candidates deal with particular situations (eg, analysing data, dealing with customers, and managing the performance of their staff). To be effective, predictors of performance situations should closely resemble those of the target job.

**Success Factor 4: Choose and train your assessors.** Acting as an assessor is demanding work. It requires a range of skills including objectivity, the ability to record and classify behaviours consistently, and a high level of stamina and commitment. Ideally, assessors should be one or two grades above the target job and understand its requirements very well. Make sure you train your assessors and give them a chance to observe and participate in the simulations themselves. This is essential if they are to agree upon what should reasonably be expected from the candidates and award scores accordingly. Make sure you train enough assessors to have at least a 1:2 ratio of assessors to candidates—with some trained reserves in case of an emergency.

**Success Factor 5: Appoint a centre manager.** Running a number of different activities for candidates throughout the day means careful co-ordination is required. If

## ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT



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possible, appoint a centre manager to prepare the materials and the rooms, meet and greet the candidates, direct them between the exercises, and deal with any logistical problems as they arise. Ideally the centre manager should be an experienced centre practitioner or an experienced assessor. This will enable them to provide quality control by checking the output of the assessors to ensure consistency of classification and marking.

**Success Factor 6: Take care with the 'wash up' process.** In the assessors' discussion or the 'wash-up' meeting, the evidence gathered on each candidate should be considered carefully. This means running through the evidence of each competency in each exercise and considering each candidate's performance. Compare candidates against the required standard for the job and not against each other

to avoid recruiting 'the best of a bad bunch'. The role of the centre manager should chair this meeting, clarifying any queries and helping resolve debates.

**Success Factor 7: Think about the candidates.** Keep in mind that an assessment centre can be a daunting prospect for candidates. Anything you can do to reduce the stress experienced by participants will increase their chances of doing themselves justice. It will also leave them with a favourable impression of your organisation. Provide them with information beforehand about what to expect and what they should do to prepare. The centre manager should brief them on arrival and encourage the assessors to be welcoming and friendly in between exercises. Assessment centres are rather like a two-way shop window and it is important to remember that

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## Finding balance

Finding balance in life and work is important, says Kaye Avery. She learned to juggle over the holidays and here she explains how juggling can help us rebalance and condition our brains to operate more efficiently.

The holiday period for most of us is a time of relaxation and an opportunity for finding another perspective on what balance means. This perspective often causes people to question why they do the work they do, and it often creates some dread about going back to work.

Over my holiday I learned how to juggle—both literally and figuratively! It's a feat I had struggled to achieve many years ago. I was on a mission to master it when I learned that the benefits of juggling, or indeed any activity that uses both sides of the brain, increases the brain's 'grey matter' and improves connectivity in its neurological structure.

My NLP teacher suggests that you can take a problem or issue you wish to resolve into a juggling session and the brain loosens its 'stuckness' enabling new possibilities and understandings while it is balancing.

An article on the Science Daily website reports that research funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council, and published in the journal *Nature Neuroscience*, appears to show improved connectivity in parts of the brain involved in making movements necessary to catch the balls while juggling.

Dr Heidi Johansen-Berg of the Department of Clinical Neurology at the University of Oxford, who led the work, says: "In fact we find the structure of the brain is ripe for change (as we age). We've shown that it is possible for the brain to condition its own wiring system to operate more efficiently."

Other research has shown that juggling improves balance, develops ambidextrousness, relieves stress and anxiety, increases grey matter and improves concentration. It also improves hand-eye coordination, motor skills and a sense of rhythm. Furthermore, juggling gives a sense of accomplishment and fun.

For me, juggling is a metaphor for finding balance in life and work. It's about balancing the many levels of external and internal activities, both conscious and unconscious—and it requires self awareness and good self-management. As soon as we are off-balance, of course, we drop the ball!

This idea in itself demonstrates the amount of focus we need to keep things in balance; consciously rebalancing after times of extended extraverted activity or stressful periods, projects or events.

The topic of work-life balance has been given less priority than the importance of productivity during the recession. But in my view, regardless of the measure of someone's 'hardiness' toward managing stress, achieving a balance between having sufficient work challenge and having enough space in a working day to gain perspective and reflect on the bigger questions, is important.

And it's not only important for work performance but it is also important for interrelationships and wellbeing in general.

From a career perspective, developing the art of juggling—and thereby improving brain functioning and reducing stress and anxiety—seems to be a pretty good career development strategy. If juggling can help an individual enhance effectiveness, imagine the positive effects that juggling activities in the workplace could have on morale and performance!

*Kaye Avery is a career coach and the director of Career and Transition Consulting. Visit [www.career-coach.co.nz](http://www.career-coach.co.nz) for more information.*



## Identifying quality trades people

Gough Gough and Hamer Ltd (GGH) is a large privately owned New Zealand company incorporating a diverse range of semi-related business—from new and used equipment, forklifts, truck and trailer accessories, earth moving equipment, through to custom engineering design.

GGH meet the challenge of providing ongoing mechanical support to the wide range of machinery distributed by conducting a yearly recruitment drive for apprentice mechanics. The company engaged OPRA to assist them design and implement a robust assessment process to determine whether candidates had the skills and potential to work inside the GGH team and culture.

GGH conducted a one-day assessment centre involving two ability assessments, a structured interview, and three bespoke simulation exercises. All were designed to tap into participants' ability to work as a team, leadership potential, and composure (all vital components for the success of mechanics in the GGH culture).

These exercises effectively identified candidates displaying resilience under pressure and potential fit within the GGH culture. Combining this with information obtained from teamwork exercises, interviews, and ability assessment enabled GGH to select a number of highly suitable candidates who could join the GGH team and contribute to organisational success.

even unsuccessful candidates may be potential customers of your organisation. Communicate the results as quickly as possible after the centre and try to offer feedback that is helpful and of practical value to their future careers.

Assessment and development centres have traditionally been used for the selection and training of graduates and managers only. Yet, as an awareness of their advantages grows, they are being applied to a wider range of people and areas of industry. The nature of some of these centres has also started to change. For example, in self-insight assessment centres employees take part as both participants and peer assessors. This has proven itself to be an effective way of enhancing employee awareness of procedures and techniques for self-development.

Assessment and development centres are extremely powerful techniques. They stand to increase your organisation's profitability by helping you recruit and retain the best employees. Incorporating the outlined key defining factors of assessment centre success is sure to assist them do so. However, these events and the simulation exercises they incorporate should be used with care and anyone wishing to run such an event should be qualified to do so.

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