assessment centres explained

Instead of the traditional job interview, increasing numbers of employers are using a new assessment technique to select employees, writes *Fiona Patterson*

An assessment centre (AC) is a selection method, not a place. ACs make use of a combination of different selection tools and allow candidates to be assessed by multiple assessors. Research consistently demonstrates that ACs are better predictors of job performance than panel interviews. ACs usually involve a one-day programme of activities and competency-based interviews designed to allow a wide-ranging assessment of an individual's effectiveness in a specific job.

key elements

Assessment by a competency model: An AC is designed to allow multiple demonstrations of the key competency domains known to determine performance in the job role. These competency domains, identified via a thorough initial analysis of the target job role, comprise the knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal qualities associated with performance in the role. For example, a job analysis might find that trainee surgeons have a particular need for effective decision-making under pressure skills. This would then be deemed a core competency, and a set of specific indicators of the competency would be drawn up.

Work-based activities: Having established a competency model, a series of work-relevant exercises are then developed to allow practical assessment of an individual's ability to demonstrate potential in the competency domains. Importantly, exercises are pitched at the appropriate level for an individual's level of training and ability to ensure fairness. This might involve a simulation, group challenge, written exercise or a presentation. In addition, pencil-and-paper measures of general mental ability, hand-eye co-ordination and personality may be used to inform final judgements of performance.

Typically, in a one-day AC, three or four exercises would be developed in addition to a competency-based structured interview. This would involve a set of agreed questions designed to measure an individual's understanding of certain competencies, their attitude to them, and – critically – past situations in which they have had to demonstrate those competencies. When assessing competencies, it is important that the domain is sampled sufficiently.

Multiple assessment, multiple assessors: The use of a range of activities ensures that each individual has a number of opportunities to demonstrate their strengths. And to avoid potential bias, each activity is usually observed by a different assessor. The final piece in the jigsaw is the construction of a matrix specifying which competencies are to be assessed in each activity. Ideally, each competency would be assessed at least three times, and usually four competencies would be assessed in any one activity. ACs are a multi-dimensional method, beyond global 'station scores' in an OSCE assessment.

Standardised assessment: Because all activities are carefully structured around a competency model, with specific behaviours being tracked within each competency, a single rating scale is used to measure performance in the various settings. Assessors are specially trained in behavioural observation and recording, ensuring that individual ratings can be explained via behaviours either within the competency model or closely related to it. As a result, when the final 'wash-up' discussion takes place, a rounded picture of each individual emerges, grounded in specific demonstrated behaviours.

potential strengths

Research over the past 20 years has consistently demonstrated that ACs are successful in making valid predictions of future job performance across a wide range of occupations. Recent research has also been reported in the medical domain (see Patterson et al, BMJ, 2005). Properly developed and designed, an AC offers a considerably more reliable and objective approach to assessing work-based performance than is possible with traditional selection and appraisal methods. Effective ACs are largely defined by four preparatory markers:

• A thorough job analysis, which ensures a representative and comprehensive set of competency domains
• Properly tailored work-relevant exercises, which strengthen the validity of the ratings given for performance within them
• A well-balanced assessment matrix, which ensures that all core competencies are assessed at least three times
• Appropriate and thorough training of assessors, which underpins the objectivity of the evaluation process

Too often, traditional selection methods (panel interviews) have relied on an assessment of performance that has been largely unstandardised and not based on core competencies. In addition, traditional approaches are subject to the vagaries of individual assessors operating without a common perspective of what constitutes good, average and poor performance. A rigorously designed AC significantly overcomes the weaknesses of traditional interview approaches.

ACs represent a fairer process than more traditional interviews, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the more objective, standardised approach, using multiple assessors, limits the potential for biased or prejudicial assessments. Secondly, the use of multiple activities allows individuals less comfortable with some selection processes (e.g. interviews and written exercises) to demonstrate qualities in a more active context (as in a simulation or group challenge).

potential dangers

The quality of an individual AC is heavily dependent its design. Poor initial research and design will inevitably compromise the process: a poor job analysis, for instance, will probably lead to a poor competency model; inappropriate exercises will probably weaken the validity or relevance of the ratings; insufficient training of assessors may undermine the objectivity of the process; asking assessors to track too many competencies in one activity will probably compromise their ability to offer sufficient detail on each competency and their ability to differentiate between competencies.

Such a process is also demanding, especially in the development stages, in terms of time, manpower and costs. Having said that, ACs are increasingly popular and widely used, especially in businesses with larger numbers of employees or where the costs of mistakes are high. In fact, contrary to popular belief, once designed, ACs are more cost-effective to run than panel interviews (see Patterson et al, 2005, BMJ). Further, initial costs are usually recouped, for instance, if the quality of individuals selected either raises the efficiency of the workforce and/or reduces attrition rates.

The ultimate test of an AC, as indeed any assessment system, is whether it can reliably measure current performance or predict future performance. Research is generally supportive of ACs, but they are only more powerful than using other methods discretely if they are designed and implemented in a way that maximises their strengths and minimises their potential danger.

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