

# Human Behaviour Academy Ltd

## Assessment Centre

### Effective Recruitment

*Dr George Leow discusses how assessment centres can switch the balance of power back to the employer.*

**“Recruiting staff has never been easy. But with changes to legislation employers are having to be ever more careful as they assess candidates. An employer’s first responsibility of course is to recruit the best possible candidate for the job; but increasingly, they must also be able to demonstrate that the process used for selection was fair, transparent and unbiased.”**

In many parts of the world including Malaysia, employees have relatively few rights and it is common for employers to terminate employment arbitrarily; and as long as the termination is not seen as unjust there is little redress. Similarly, as long as an employer can prove that he has not been biased toward or against particular applicants because of their race, sex, religion, national origin, physical disability, marital status, or age, he can recruit pretty much as he pleases.

Although the same regime used to apply in Britain and other European countries, there has been a steady stream of legislation which means that in some countries, notably France but many other European countries too, where once an individual is hired, it is almost impossible to dispense with their services regardless of commercial need, incompetence and even dishonesty.

The challenge facing employers is thus huge. Firstly the business case for recruitment must be thoroughly watertight. The return on investment must be able to withstand economic downturn and be a considerable multiple of the very significant cost of employment.

Secondly, the process must be able to prophesy with considerable certainty how the candidate will perform in the role once hired and with sufficient robustness that it can withstand legal challenge from unsuccessful candidates after a decision has been made.

For certain jobs this is less of a problem. Candidates for manual, technical or clerical vacancies can be tested for practical competence. But for managerial jobs where success is likely to be rest on the possession of soft skills like leadership, salesmanship, negotiation skill or listening; this may be less easy to achieve.

The traditional recruitment tool was examination of a resume or Curriculum Vitae followed by one or two or more interviews. Whilst this is a well tried and tested methodology it has a number of flaws:

- Senior candidates live and breathe interviews. It’s what they do; so even the most inadequate candidate is likely to be able to tell a good story at interview.
- Many candidates “dress” their information to disguise problems in their track record. Although subsequent discovery of factual untruths may be cause for dismissal,

many employers are reluctant to pursue fraudulent applications because of the cost, the potential litigation risk and the damage to reputation that could ensue.

- Most interviewers are not skilled at questioning and tend to rely on gut instinct (often formed in the first few seconds after first meeting the interviewee). They form an opinion and then spend the rest of the interview confirming it.
- Such are the risks of discriminating against a client, many interviewers are afraid to ask penetrating questions that would reveal flaws and weaknesses for fear that afterwards the candidate could cite the question as being prejudicial.
- Even in highly regulated situations with panel interviews and professional interviewers, the format can be so rigid that the opportunity to probe can be severely limited by the strictures imposed by the process itself. Experienced managers often quip that they learn more about a candidate in their first morning at work than they do from the most rigorous of interview processes. And the reasons are obvious.

In an interview the candidate is guarded. He or she has spent hours preparing for the meeting (or should have done), is well rehearsed (or should be) and is in a predictable and controlled environment. The interviewer by contrast is often ill prepared (how often have you scanned a resume while walking to the interview room?), is inexperienced with in depth interviewing skills and is concerned that an ill judged question could land him and his company in deep trouble.

How then to select candidates fairly but with rigour? The growing answer is Assessment Centres. In an assessment centre the candidate is put through a series of exercises designed to simulate the working environment. The popular show "The Apprentice" is a classic example of a modern assessment centre. Although "dramatized" to appeal to a television audience, the shows do demonstrate how candidates can be put through a series of tasks designed to test their innate skills and bring out their strengths and weaknesses.

The structure of assessment centres will vary depending on the number of candidates being recruited, the skills required and the job description. However a typical one day structure may look something like this:

At the end of an assessment centre, an assessor will have a very good idea of how their chosen candidate will perform on the job and will be able to identify areas of post recruitment training and development that will be needed. They will be confident that not only will the successful candidate(s) have a good chance of succeeding after they have been appointed, but that the process will have provided absolute and objective measures that will convince unsuccessful candidates that they have been fairly treated.

The length, rigour and intensity of assessment centres can be adjusted to suit the needs and culture of the company and the seniority of the post under recruitment; but as a minimum the items asterisked in the table above should be included.

The organization of an assessment centre may be more onerous than a conventional interview schedule but with the easy availability of online resources such as downloadable in tray exercises and leadership activities, once the structure has been set up, it is a simple administrative exercise to organize.

As legislation conspires to tip the recruitment process in favour of the candidate, the assessmentcentre is the employer's way of and ensuring that he levels the playing field and recruits the beststaff with minimum risk.