

FAQ For
Human Behaviour Academy Ltd
Assessment Centre
Professional | Precision | Prestige

Q: How do such centres operate? What is the usual procedure?

A: Assessment centres rest on the notion that if one understands the requirements of the job for which one is selecting, it is possible to develop real-life or life-like situations and exercises that will bring out behaviours either correlated to or parallel with those required by the job. People, usually called candidates, often are in a group setting and are asked to participate in exercises while trained observers record their behaviour. When relevant behaviour is witnessed, assessors decide where and how that behaviour is scored. For example, assessor Smith watches Ms. Jones quite expressively explain why her “employee” should be promoted; in an interview, she speaks emphatically of specific career aspirations and past successes. Assessor Smith uses these behaviours to conclude that candidate Jones is highly impactful (persuasive or assertive) in the situations she has witnessed. The behaviour observed is presumptive evidence that highly similar behaviour will be exhibited on the job for which Jones is being assessed. Other assessors similarly make their independent judgments, all of which are then pooled. Staff prepares a summary report. This report is often used as a basis for formal feedback discussions with the candidate. This feedback is thought to help the candidate to use the assessors’ observations for both self and career development. Furthermore, the report is delivered to those charged with promotion decisions. The candidate’s immediate superior usually does not see the report, unless by special arrangement with the centre staff and the candidate himself. There are variations. Variations are determined partly by the job level for which assessment is conducted— 1st line supervisors versus managers—and some variation is accounted for by the personal beliefs of those running the centre .

Q: How are candidates chosen?

A: Either by self-nomination or by being asked to participate by an organisation. Individual participants attend the assessment session to evaluate themselves to evaluate their competencies in different fields.

Q: How long does the process take?

A: There is some variation here, too, but one to five days seems to be quite common. Many begin on a Monday or a Tuesday morning and finish that week. On the other hand, some feel that it takes ten working days to do a competent assessment.

Q: Who are the assessors, and how are they selected?

A: Usually they are management people from within the organization. And, they are often chosen because they express an interest in being assessors and because they are a rank or two above the level of the candidates themselves. Usually they do not have a personal or familial relationship to the candidates.

Q: How are assessors trained, and what do they do?

A: Presently, the pattern of training is quite varied, with some assessors being carefully trained in how to observe behaviour, how to distinguish between the various dimensions, and how to write a report. Other assessors probably aren't given much beyond an hour or two of orientation. Usually assessors are provided with a description of the job for which candidates are assessed. They will be furnished a coding sheet to help them make use of all the information they will witness as the exercises progress. These coding sheets identify the constructs by exercise, provide examples of the behaviour that qualifies as a sign of the dimension(s) and guidance on how to integrate the behaviour the candidate exhibits. Last, there usually is guidance on how to conduct an interview, which often is a part of the total centre experience.

Q: There evidently is a great deal of information available to the people who act as assessors. How can they make sense out of all they observe?

A: The easy answer is—with a lot of effort. Doing assessments is hard work. First, assessors must learn to pay attention to some behaviours and to ignore others. That is easier said than done. Second, they must have help in knowing where to classify certain behaviour. For example, pressing one's point in a group ordinarily is classed as assertive or aggressive behaviour. Or, expressing a lack of interest in what others' reactions are may be classed as independence, insensitivity, or arrogance, depending on the situation, the emotional tone, etc.

An enormous amount of behaviour is available. The assessor must continuously decide whether what is observed is useful information, and then decide in what way to code (make meaning of) it.

Q: So, assessors play a really major role in determining whether a candidate makes it or not?

A: Yes, and no. They *do* play a major role in writing a report, yes. And, they must be sharp in discriminating between, for example, such dimensions as sensitivity and passivity. They also must be able to gather relevant behavioural data on a candidate and to say, "Because this candidate did or said (. . .) I conclude that (. . .)." On the other hand, we need to remember that the assessment centre report is not the sole basis for promotions. Past performance, superior recommendations, and availability all figure in heavily. So, the centre report is just one more bit of information the organization uses to promote people. And, a negative report does not necessarily mean that one is automatically disqualified from consideration.

Q: As an assessee, how do I learn what the centre report says?

A: As we said, staff people prepare a report that is delivered to officers charged with promotion decisions. That report is confidential and not routinely available to your present superior. Staff will give you feedback about the report and often permit you to review its contents. Your choice to discuss your report with your immediate superior would depend on mutual agreement between the two of you. Sometimes that is helpful in improving performance and in long-range planning; sometimes it is damaging.

Q: You mentioned understanding the job requirements before conducting an assessment. How does that work?

A: You may know that a job analysis is a procedure that tells us what must be done to be successful on a job. That information allows us also to say, “This is what it takes to do this job. Here are the characteristics (the behaviours) that will separate the high from the low potential candidate.”

A job analysis leads to specifications for the applicant and that, in turn, leads us to choose what we call dimensions.

Q: What do you mean when you use the word “dimension”?

A: A dimension is a convenient term for a group of behaviours that have a common denominator. For example, if the job analysis reveals that one must do many administrative and/or planning activities, the centre may label one of the job dimensions “administrative planning” and translate that decision into group or individual exercises that measure one’s performance at certain administrative tasks.

Another example. A job analysis may reveal that some tasks require a good deal of communicating—transmitting information. The dimension we want to measure is communicating. In fact, we may want to measure transmission, receiving, and processing information. And, we would like to measure them with tasks as similar to the job itself as practical. As many dimensions are chosen as seem necessary to encompass the principal behaviours the successful performance of the job demands.

Q: The dimensions, then, are measured by a series of exercises?

A: Yes. The number of exercises depends on how deep and the requirement by the employers. For example, some employees would like to evaluate the basic understanding of the employee and they do not need to go through as many tests as those employees that would like to understand the holistic approach of the employees.

Q: And how are those exercises designed? What are they like?

A: First, they are *not* like group psychotherapy or counseling. No one probes and presses on personal issues, nor does anyone on the staff confront you on personal beliefs or motivations. Rather, a series of life-like situations is created; simulations of what the job really demands are developed. For example, one dimension used is sometimes called initiative, or impact, or persuasiveness. It is a form of dominance in group situations. To measure that dimension, a group situation is created in which the candidates are given a set of circumstances (e.g., the disposition of an employee request for promotion or for training) and are asked to discuss the “case.” Generally, the exercises are intended to measure *one or more* of the dimensions we’re interested in. A second dimension, one usually called oral communication (one’s ability to be lucid in discussion or in transmitting information), can be measured through any of the exercises that require oral expression. One exercise used to measure skill and information transmission is a simulated interview in which a candidate plays a supervisor role with a resistant or deficient employee.

Q: As an assessor who did not do particularly well the last time I went through the centre, what alternatives do I have?

A: Most organizations have a policy that publicly states that a second opportunity to go through the centre is available. In fact, organizations should state all such policies so that candidates know what to expect. Included in those policies is one about informed consent. The purpose of the centre, how reports are controlled, what their life span is, etc., all should be matters of policy and conveyed to employees in such a way that they participate under what we call informed consent.

Q: Is it usual practice for an organization to assume that candidates, whether employed or not, will go through the centre? If so, is that ethical?

A: It is usually considered ethical if the procedure does not demean or insult the candidate, if the candidate knows the purpose of the experience, and if the resulting data are handled according to professional guidelines. If decisions are based on the experience, there should be a clear relationship between the information gathered and the decision made.

Q: Perhaps I meant just that. Is it ethical for organizations to use the information gathered at the centre and use it in personnel decisions?

A: We are now moving into legal questions, I believe. And, we are moving into validity questions. Let us say that an organization is permitted to use assessment centres and other techniques as well when the technique is shown to be job-related. In turn, showing job-relatedness means (a) a good job analysis; (b) careful choice of dimensions; (c) exercises that measure behaviour relevant to the dimensions; (d) well-trained assessors; (e) carefully written reports and control on report dissemination; (f) evidence that the report contents relate to a criterion such as promotion, job success, etc.

All of those issues have legal ramifications and bases, and they all reflect guidelines growing out of measurement, personality theory, group dynamics, etc. My point is that ethics revolves around subterfuge and/or withholding and confusing the information/decision complex.

Q: I understand that the assessment centre is psychometrically sound, has legal support, predicts management level fairly well, and generally seems to be what we need. Is that true?

A: Depending on which assessment centre you are considering, what you say could be true, yes. There are studies that show the effectiveness of centres. There also are studies that purport to show effectiveness, but they are confounded.

In cases where adverse impact is alleged, the government has said that method, per se, is not the most important consideration. One's procedures, whatever they are, must meet certain criteria. The assessment centre is no different from other procedures in that regard.

Q: Just how good is the assessment centre model? What can it do that other selection methods cannot do?

A: From the organization's point of view, it can do many things.

1. It can give us information on how people deal with work-like situations and problems.

This is particularly important if what the candidate normally does is dissimilar to the job tasks that person will be expected to do.

2. It can tell us something about how a candidate deals with highly personal situations.

That is, if the job for which assessment is conducted involves a good many close relationships with people—team work, group planning, that sort of thing— then exercises involving role playing and problem solving can be useful. Many promotions *do* involve doing new things, and what we want to do is measure the behaviours related to doing those new tasks.

3. Along with helping us to understand a person's characteristic pattern of dealing with people, we can arrive at some judgments about style factors. Supervisory style is difficult to assess, and it properly feeds into the candidate's perceptions of himself. Feedback from exercises can serve the purpose of alerting one to style characteristics that may not be functional in a specific work situation.

Evidently centres are used now to help select people for a wide variety of jobs ranging from supervisors in industry to managers of departments in government. Some even talk of using it to select people in service occupations, such as teaching. What sort of job lends itself to the use of centres?

The principal guideline in answering that question is the decision as to whether we can create exercises and simulations that closely match those on the job for which one is being assessed. If we can, the job level does not, *per se*, rule out the use of the assessment centre model. On the other hand, the costs involved in developing proper exercises, assessor training, and the set up of the centre may well not be worth the investment.

Q: The assessment centre exercises and procedures I've seen seem to be well developed. There are certain routines to follow, there is a strong presumption of organization support for the process, and the exercises have an air of soundness. Is the high level of acceptance of centres based partly on that?

A: There probably are many reasons for the acceptance of an idea whose time has come. The history of the idea, the original justification for it, and early utility of it, and the evident potential of it all argue for serious consideration. Furthermore, creating the impression that one is organized and that what one is doing has organization sanction are powerful supports.

The aura of soundness doesn't mean there is anything magical about assessment centres. It doesn't mean an immense psychological breakthrough in selection. It may mean more effectiveness in return for a lot of hard work. It may mean certain aspects or exercises possess high validity in selecting, for example, sales managers. The carefully planned centre exercises and routines do not imply goodness in and of themselves. They do not imply magic. We are not dealing with rhinoceros horns and baby urine.

Q: Some criticize the assessment centre for failing to prevent the influence of subtle but persistent organization ideologies from affecting recommendations. For example, one ideology might give undue emphasis to assertion, or to high planfulness, and soon.

A: The reverse argument is also heard. It is possible to use the assessment centre to infuse different personality types into an organization and thus employ a more heterogeneous and dynamic work force. Some organizations would profit from such new blood.

It is fashionable nowadays to talk of typologies of people. Some are security-minded, some are Type A, some Type B, and so on. Some follow a straight-line career course, while others engage in some lateral and between-company moves. Others spiral their way through life, with each cycle in the spiral lasting five to seven years and touching different careers on the way. Others just zigzag through jobs with no evident plan or conscious intent.

What we are saying is that the assessment centre may homogenize the workforce at a certain level and make it difficult for certain “types” to be successful in certain organizations. That probably has always been true.

Some organizations are not congenial places for some people to work in. A solid and unyielding fix on what it takes to do a job is easily institutionalized. When that occurs, any selection procedure can be made to feed the rigidities in the system. There is little evidence that the assessment centre is better or worse than any other method at finding people who would unbalance the equilibrium in such systems. That is not to say that the centre cannot do it; it can.

Q: You have mentioned both time and the energy involved in doing good assessments. How?

A: The reported cost figures vary from about RM500, at the very bottom end, to several thousands at the top. Of course, it is important to know how one is determining cost. One set of out-of-pocket costs involves setting up the centre training assessors, hiring staff and/or consultants, etc. In addition, there is transportation and food for candidates as well as their salaries for being not obviously productive. (But they probably are learning useful things about how people react, how they process information, etc.) And, we must also ask, how often will assessors be re-used? How about office overhead? Materials cost money, and it costs even more to develop one's own. And so on.

So, we do need to make these calculations, but we also need to compare the figures to something else. If we spend twice what is usual for a 10 percent improvement, that is one thing. To spend twice as much for 100 percent improvement is quite different.

Q: How do centres set up for development differ from those set up for selection?

A: Their purpose should be publicly identified as development, not decision. Program participants are more likely to ask, “What can I learn about myself and how can I grow?” rather than “Can I do well enough to qualify for promotion to management?” Feedback is more informal, less evaluative, and more geared to an individual's unique needs than to the question, “How do I look in comparison to other candidates for management jobs?”

Q: But there are similarities too, aren't there?

A: Yes. For example, both types of centres may involve simulations that can diagnose weaknesses and strengths. Both involve feedback to the participant. Both may include interviews, and so on.

But the use of simulations, interviews, and role plays followed by a written report *does not* mean that the two processes are identical. The *forms* may be similar. The *intentions and processes* differ.

Q: As an assesse going to a centre for development, I am not at all certain I want to be inmanagement, and not certain I want to stay with this organization. What dimensions are?

A: The dimensions might not be dramatically different in your case. There may be more of them. For example, one's ability to follow others' comments, and to build on them while using others' inputs in a group decision process is often a composite of many factors going under various names. The complex could be broken down into factors or dimensions called sensitivity, acceptance, deference, assertion, etc. Each could be a separate exercise leading to a statement such as: In a group setting, Mr. Smith is able to take a long view of results while systematically listening, adding relevant information or comments, evaluating those comments, showing their usefulness, and moving the group forward to an agreeable decision.

The dimensions involved could well be those also applicable to a management position in which "leadership" is thought important. Usual dimensions are sometimes composed of many sub-dimensions, as the example of leadership and problem-solving prove. We can say the same thing for communication. Some people speak clearly; others write clearly.

Some can provide a verbal summary following reading; others can summarize after having listened. While these skills are clearly related, they are not "the same dimension." Each might be measured separately in a finely tuned career development centre .

Q: You have talked about the dimensions, but can you talk about the kinds of exercises used?

A: Usually exercises are conducted in groups or pairs. For example, you may participate in an exercise in which the directions are: You are about to play the role of Jason Riblett, manager of the marketing department. Mr. Riblett has been on vacation for two weeks and he has just entered his office to face a variety of problems, questions, concerns, etc., all of which have collected in his two-week absence.

Your task is to study each of the problems (each of which is described in the papers you have). Then you are to decide what, if anything, you will do in each case. Write out your decision(s), and make any notes you wish concerning your own deliberations.

At the end of about 30 minutes, you will meet with an assessor to discuss the problems you faced. That discussion will be tape recorded and used when the final report is written. And it will be used in a second discussion where other assessors' comments can be used to help you to better understand your own problem-solving, managerial behaviour.

Do you have any questions? Is your assignment clear?

Generally, exercises do not require you to talk about personal matters, nor will you be expected to press other participants to do so. Generally, too, it will be clear what the assignment or task is and in most cases what you will be asked to do has a close resemblance to what jobs typically require. On the other hand, the content may seem to you

off base. If that is your impression, you should feel free to ask how the exercise is thought helpful to job-related events. You will probably be in a group where no one is the assigned leader. You may be in a simulated interview when you play a role. You probably will be asked, Tell us why you did (. . .) or didn't do (. . .)

Q: What can I learn from assessments? Especially if I don't want to be a manager, is it worth the effort to go to a centre ?

A: That is, of course, an individual thing, but I believe you can learn useful things. Some of those are pretty general, but they may still be helpful to spell out.

1. You can learn how you deal with people. For example, how well others accept what suggestions are areas in which you may become more sensitive. You are not likely to become immediately more skilful.
2. You can learn more about how you process information. For example, what did you ignore, or forget? Did you take information at face value, or did you add your own evaluation? When did you decide to solicit information from others?
3. You can learn more about how you react to people. When people pressed, did you get defensive and overly tense? Did you quit when others simply raised their voices to you, or did you quietly press to a resolution? Was your chief motive to gain personal acceptance rather than acceptance of your ideas?

Those are a few of the areas you should be able to make some headway on. Remember, you can't expect gigantic and traumatic insights in a few days; some people work on those areas for a lifetime without significant progress. On the other hand, if you attend with the idea of learning something about how you relate to others and to yourself, you will find the experience helpful. Moreover, if you expect both assessors and other participants to provide helpful feedback, your experience will be even more poignant.

Q: I am concerned that not being interested in management here at XYZ will prejudice my chance for promotion. I feel this is especially true if I do not do particularly well or if I am open about what I feel are deficiencies. How are reports handled? Who reads about me?

A: The practice should be that you get (or can review) your own report that is prepared by the staff. The organization also has a right to some feedback on your performance. The form of that report is crucial to your question. If it is evaluative, that is one thing. Content of that kind may well reduce your promotion chances. On the other hand, a descriptive report carefully written need not necessarily do you in. The answer depends on whether the centre is established for truly developmental purposes. The answer depends on whether the organization sees the centre as helpful to employees on a personal-career basis rather than on a base of "future promotion material."

Q: You seem to be saying that someone else writes the report, and depending on how that report is written, it may or may not prove helpful to a given participant. Do I have any opportunity to review that report before it's written?

The exercises along with evidence from the exercises themselves. Then, too, if the centre is really developmentally oriented, there should already have been a discussion of the experiences that are calculated to help you both on your job and for the future. The emphasis should fall on *what can be capitalized on and enhanced*, not on *weaknesses that may be*

detriments. For example, one developmental experience might be to review performance standards with your superior. Frequently such standards are not clear, and that in turn leads to low levels of job satisfaction because of apparent mediocre performance. Soliciting specific guidance from a superior involves hazards, to be sure, but the reasonableness of that approach usually becomes obvious in the long run.

Other and quite different experiences include growth groups, weekend retreats, individual psychological help, marital counselling, etc. The emphasis is important and correct emphasis lessens your feelings as a participant that you are going to be done in unless.

Contact us now

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