

# talent on show

Résumés can't reveal everything about a prospective hire. And current performance is often not enough to predict how a high-potential may adapt to a new job. As *HRM's Balli Kaur* discovers, many employers are turning to assessment centres to analyse true potential

In an ideal world, every job application would fully illuminate the candidate's profile: from their specific skills set to leadership abilities and their willingness to grow. Employers want a thorough understanding of a potential recruit's capabilities before signing on the dotted line. There are aspects of the interview process which emphasise candidates' career goals and aptitude, but these may only shed light on one dimension of their profile, leaving many corners in the dark. This can be particularly problematic when the role is heavy on multitasking and cross-departmental projects.



## assessment criteria

Seasoned assessors say these are some of the skills and qualities they try to identify and evaluate during an assessment centre session:

- + Team working
- + Communication
- + Leadership
- + Time-management
- + Listening
- + Motivation and enthusiasm
- + Data analysis
- + Decision-making
- + Influencing
- + Creativity
- + Integrity
- + Initiative



Assessment centers are HR's answer to the second-guessing which comes with their hiring decisions. Although the name implies an established or structured facility, "assessment center" is really a catch-all term consisting of a variety of techniques and exercises for skills evaluation. These exercises help HR to make more accurate judgments on behaviours relevant to the most critical aspects of the job in question. They also provide job candidates with an idea of the kinds of activities they will be expected to take on if they accept the role.

Organisations can also turn to these evaluation techniques as development tools for existing staff. HR's chief complaint about succession planning is the inability to foresee whether an employee will sink or swim in a position with more responsibilities. Promoting to leadership and managerial roles can therefore require painstaking efforts in skills and character evaluation. Assessment centers can help HR narrow its pool of high potential employees for advancement opportunities.

However, the success of an assessment centre exercise depends largely on HR's intentions. Willian Wan, Managing Director, Talent Plus, says the nature of exercises and the competency of the assessors play important roles here. It also helps to have clear-cut goals. "Identifying the criteria is critical – it will depend on the ability to derive them from sound analysis," he says.

For example, if HR wants to assess a candidate's organisational and time-management abilities, they can do an "in-basket" exercise. The candidate is given a list of items which must be addressed within a certain time frame. They are asked to prioritise the items and justify the reasons behind each ranking.

Employers who want to test social skills and networking abilities may consider placing the candidate in an informal event to judge how they utilise the time and situation to ask important questions.

Employers can also supplement these activities with an objective structured interview and psychometric analysis. "The exercises in themselves may not yield the results you want," Wan explains. He warns that no matter how

## case study

# developing with Bayer Schering Pharma

**“There is no way you can objectively replicate a simulated session as the dynamic changes with different participants”**

William Wan, managing director,  
Talent Plus



many assessment procedures employers carry out, they must design them pragmatically.

### Challenges and drawbacks

The selection of assessors is an important undertaking. HR should not take job titles or seniority as the only prerequisites. A managing director or vice president of HR may know the company's business needs, but they need to have some experience in out-of-the-box thinking in order to best take on an assessor's tasks.

Jasmine Teo, Regional HR Manager, Bayer Schering Pharma, says senior management must also make time to participate. But if the assessment centre is being used to determine promotions among current employees, HR should ensure the participants' managers are not one of the observers. All of these stipulations may greatly narrow down the list of eligible assessors.

Wan warns employers not to take the results of their assessments as permanent conclusions. Candidates who do not make the right impression may develop further and excel in other forms of assessment. There is also a chance that some candidates selected will falter once they experience their role on a nine-to-five basis. It is not clear that assessment centre evaluations correlate directly to real-world performance, or that these evaluations predict future performance in a specific role outside the simulated tasks. “There is no way you can objectively replicate a simulated session as the dynamic changes with different participants,” Wan says.

Bayer Schering Pharma carries out assessment exercises to identify the skills of staff in a range of career stages. Regarded as an intensive investment with long-term returns, the company's development centres target top-calibre staff. These are defined by abilities to lead and think strategically, as well as the drive to maximise their roles. There are also the orientation centres for junior employees considered for middle management positions. Leadership and executive development centres aim to identify mid-term potential for senior and executive positions respectively.

Jasmine Teo, Regional HR Manager, says the benefits are ultimately twofold. Employees are able to identify their strengths while the company has a chance to pick out talent and consider certain employees for management roles. “Overall, the intent is for both employees and the company to take stock of the capabilities they have now and in the future,” she says.

Development centre assessments take place over two-to-three days. Participants are placed in fictitious scenarios based on real situations that managers confront on the job. A range of leadership skills are tested through strategy meetings, role-plays, employee discussions and simulated media interviews.

Teo says opportunities for constructive criticism are as valuable as the observation and selection processes. “Participants like the concrete, intense feedback that they receive from a senior manager,” she says. The feedback may allow participants to recognise their blind spots or it may just reinforce what they already know about their skills set, but either way, they come away with a clearer picture of their capabilities.

The learning does not end there. Managers create development plans for participants to chart out their future career paths. From the company's perspective, this plan can feed into its talent reviews and succession planning. HR and managers can also see who is fit for international assignments. For employees, the evaluations enhance their sense of belonging, and - if done in a supportive and non-threatening environment - act as a motivation and retention tool.



## top three assessment activities

- » **Leaderless group discussion:** applicants meet as a group to discuss an actual job-related problem
- » **Role playing:** candidates assume the role of the incumbent of the position and must deal with another person in a job-related situation
- » **“In-basket”:** the candidate is given a list of items which must be prioritised within a certain time frame

HR also cannot ignore the pretense factor. Assessment centres, like interviews, give employers a snapshot of a candidate's experience, success and passion but in a dynamic simulated environment. “That is a far cry from how they will behave when not observed,” Wan says. Candidates can put forward their best behaviours and show employers what they want them to know.

Hiring is still a gamble, no matter how thorough the evaluation. Employers should be aware that assessment centres do not guarantee absolute transparency. If HR bases its entire judgment of a candidate on the outcomes of these evaluations, or if it treats these exercises as their only form of employee evaluation, they risk becoming blind to candidates' future mistakes; unconsciously making concessions for them when gaps in their skills become apparent.

At the same time, employers looking to weigh up current employees' skills may find that their employees have misperceptions of the purpose behind the exercises. “An element of pressure surrounds those who are being evaluated,” admits Teo. “They may think it's a test they can pass or fail.” While the outcomes of these evaluations can affect promotions and salary increments, HR needs to find ways to reduce the tension and threat of penalty which some employees consider imminent in evaluations.

Teo suggests having open suggestions with employees to clear any misinformation about the evaluations' purpose. HR can encourage employees to consider assessments as opportunities to discover themselves. “The more you put in, the more you get out of it,” she tells employees. She also reminds employees to behave as normally as they can, otherwise the feedback will not reveal an accurate skill set. These tactics have proven successful in managing perspectives, although employees at Bayer Schering Pharma (see case study) still jokingly refer to “assassination centres”.

Finances are another challenge to consider. Assessment centre sessions normally run from one to three days, and the budgetary impact can be substantial. According to one source, conducting an assessment centre can cost between US \$1000 and US\$5000 per individual per day. In lean times, the organisation must decide if assessment centres are a necessity or just another item on the employment wishlist. **HRM**



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