



ILLUSTRATION: WINNIE HO

Developing leaders in an Asian business landscape
Week 7: Using Assessment Centres

Using valuable tools to test the mettle of candidates

The robust approach to identifying potential

Every company must select and develop leaders who best fit the style and future direction of the organisation. In doing this, they can make use of several different methods, the appropriateness of which will depend on factors ranging from the prevailing business and management environment to the desires and expectations of the personnel being assessed.

Previously, we looked at how companies use diverse tools and methods to develop a list of high potential employees. As a next step, many organisations also choose to take a more robust approach to testing the mettle of those individuals by using tailor-made assessment or development centres to ensure that they have indeed identified the right people to take the business forward.

According to the British Psychological Society, these techniques have gained widespread recognition and support. They are seen as a systematic and rigorous means of identifying behaviour, and can therefore be applied for the purposes of recruitment, selection, promotion and development within the workplace.

Generally, assessment centres are used to guide decisions about recruitment and promotion, while development centres are designed to pinpoint what a person needs to perform more effectively in the short and medium term within the broad context of the business.

Whatever the specific objective, the process will provide comprehensive and relevant information about each candidate. And since this is derived from multiple observations and judgments, it is then possible to understand staff more completely and plan the appropriate action to overcome individual skill gaps.

A typical assessment centre begins with a standardised evaluation of the subject's behaviour using different methods. These are likely to include job-related simulations, interviews, psychometric and aptitude tests, and a 360-degree feedback exercise. Throughout, several trained observers note down their opinions before comparing views and ideas either in a meeting or by means of an averaging process.

The theory is that you get a far more objective assessment if trained professionals observe the same person in a variety of circumstances. For example, a candidate's listening skills might be assessed during a role-play simulating a conversation between a manager and a subordinate. Meanwhile, other characteristics or abilities would be seen in a role-play involving peers or during a team exercise.

To get the most out of the process, the British Psychological Society suggests that assessors should be well trained and drawn from as diverse a pool as possible in terms of ethnicity, gender and age. The society also recommends that one member of the assessment team is a trained occupational psychologist.

It is also a major advantage if each

Always remember you're unique, just like everyone else

Anonymous

assessor is familiar with behavioural interviewing techniques. When employing these, the interviewer aims to elicit answers which assist in predicting future success based on actual past behaviour. In practice, the candidate would be asked to give specific instances of when he or she demonstrated certain traits or skills.

A trained interviewer will then be able to spot required or undesirable characteristics and know when to ask further probing questions which, at times, may even deliberately try to discomfit the interviewee. If handled properly, it is very difficult for the candidate to obfuscate or give "fake" answers, since the focus is firmly on what the person has genuinely done.

Clearly, the exercises chosen for an assessment centre can vary significantly. However, the best results are usually achieved if they include a series of role-plays simulating encounters with people at different levels of authority.

Another recommended test is to give participants a scenario and ask them to conduct a meeting based on it. For the observers, this helps to demonstrate leadership, problem-solving and organisational abilities. It is a moot point whether the assessors should take a part in such exercises or remain separate, but either method is possible.

In addition, candidates might be asked to read a case study and then make a presentation showing how to resolve the problems it entailed. Alternatively, this idea could be turned into a group exercise to see how all the participants worked together to find an answer defined by set criteria.

If psychological tests are used, they fall into two broad categories. Firstly, there are questionnaires designed to determine personality traits, beliefs, values and interests. These can also measure motivation or "drive", and there are no right or wrong answers, since there is no right or wrong personality type. The aim is to discover how the person normally feels, what motivates them, and how they think.

Secondly, there are tests of aptitude, ability or attainment, intended to be a measure of potential or maximum performance. These tests usually have a fixed time limit and here the assessors are looking for "correct" answers.

A further element, now growing in popularity is to seek multi-source or 360-degree feedback. In doing this, a selection of superiors, peers and subordinates give their views on the candidate's behaviour, abilities and attitude. Companies can develop such tests to meet their own requirements or buy "off-the-shelf" versions. The main purpose is for the candidate to gain self-awareness and turn weaknesses into strengths and make all-round personal improvements.

By holding comprehensive assessment centres, an organisation has a better understanding of who has the most potential in which area and, therefore, can decide future assignments and shape corporate policy more effectively.

Nowadays, the work of developing and administering assessment centres can be fully outsourced. If a company takes that route, it should ensure the service provider not only has a good track record, but also has a full suite of exercises, at least one occupational psychologist, and a team of trained professionals. Any psychological tests considered should be certified against a norm-based representative group similar to the people being assessed.

The advantage of outsourcing is that the work can go ahead with minimal delays or disruption to the organisation, but it may be more costly.

The alternative is to train in-house staff to conduct the assessments. This can be done with the help of a professional consultant and is a route often favoured by larger employers with continuing requirements or, perhaps, tighter budgets. One notable drawback of this approach is that it may demand the involvement of a significant number of managers and prove difficult to guarantee consistent quality.

A third option is to combine the best of both worlds, with outside specialists providing training, co-ordination and the necessary discipline for the process, while internal managers contribute an in-depth understanding of the standards against which people must be assessed.

Things work best if managers overseeing the assessment centre have themselves been through the process. This allows them an insight into how the candidates will feel, and the experience should give them a much better understanding of the organisation, plus an enhanced ability to observe, assess and debrief participants on matters relating to their performance and behaviour. In a day-to-day context, the experience should also improve managers in situations where they need to coach or give feedback to their direct subordinates.

In the current business environment, companies must be serious about managing talent.

The starting point is to set out clear criteria to measure performance. However, if they really want to get the best out of staff and keep the organisation moving forward, it is also vital to have a robust approach to identifying potential.

Assessment or development centres, whether conducted internally or outsourced, have become an essential part of the process.



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On the Web visit www.classifiedpost.com/opinionpoll to participate in our online poll: "Do you feel like your organisation has the leadership succession for the future?" The results will be published in this column.

Training puts execs in an 'amazing race'

When Cathy Lee Kit-yee, human resources and administration manager for Fitness First (Hong Kong), plans an executive training programme for senior management, she makes sure the participants have no idea what to expect. At least, that is, until about two days before the course begins.

Only then does she send out a few basic instructions, but these are deliberately designed to intrigue as much as to inform. For example, people might be told to meet at 6.30am in Mong Kok, bringing a list of items that could include old clothes, a notebook, hiking boots, anti-mosquito spray, swimming gear and instant noodles.

After assembling, they split into four teams and learn a little more. But as in the TV shows *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, these details are just the first in a series of clues, directions and challenges which could take them all over Hong Kong in the course of the next 36 hours.

The more we keep things secret, the more the participants will learn about how to adapt to new situations

Cathy Lee
HR and administration manager
Fitness First (Hong Kong)

things secret, the more the participants will learn about how to adapt to new situations. The programme was introduced in April last year, initially for about 20 senior managers, and is gradually being expanded to include support staff and more junior personnel.

Ms Lee said the primary objective was to strengthen team spirit, but the exercises also gave staff the opportunity to challenge themselves in new ways and to confront deep-seated fears.

"The different tests combine both physical and mental aspects, and give staff something to work out in groups," she said. "The tasks may have no relation to their work, but they teach them how to solve problems and co-operate more closely."

To inject a sense of urgency, the teams must race each other and, to test their ingenuity, some clues are deliberately confusing. A map of Sai Kung, for instance, may have no bearing on the actual route required to get to the next stop.

To ensure that no one tries to skip any required steps, certain receipts or proofs have to be collected along the way. For those who encounter difficulties, there is an "emergency" envelope to get them back on track. But opening this envelope automatically means points deducted from the final score.

During the race, each team may have to buy food for dinner and later cook it over an open fire at a campsite. The second day is likely to include more outdoor activities such as raft building or jumping from a height into open water. The mental part of the challenge comes in the form of IQ tests or puzzles, the results of which go towards the team's scores. Taken together, all the different elements promote teamwork, test individual limits and encourage self-awareness.

Ms Lee said one recent exercise required participants to climb one of the highest hills on Lantau. At the top, they were asked to sit and think about personal goals and areas where the company could do better, and to jot down all their ideas in a notebook.

"Overall, the response has been very good," Ms Lee said. "The programme is hard, but it gives everyone a chance to overcome weaknesses and build strengths." She said the immediately visible benefits included improved communication in the workplace and a greater willingness for colleagues to help each other out. That was vital, since the efficient running of the firm's chain of seven fitness clubs in Hong Kong often came down to dealing with "human issues" rather than sorting out specific technical problems.

Ms Lee has tackled even the scariest challenges herself. "Before the abseiling, I was almost crying. But people really encouraged me, telling me not to look down - and I made it."



Cathy Lee says benefits are immediately visible. Photo: Edward Wong

InBrief

Seminar addresses future unemployment

A seminar organised by employment services provider Manpower Hong Kong last month brought together the government, academia, non-government organisations and private enterprises to explore ways to collaborate to find the solution to an emerging long-term employment problem in Hong Kong. Manpower proposed "Working Links", a tripartite programme run in Britain, as a possible solution. The unique and stable business has transformed the lives of unemployed people through a focus on long-term sustainable work. More than 60 per cent of unemployed Comprehensive Social Security Assistant recipients in Hong Kong have been on the scheme for more than three years. To help them rejoin the workforce, the Social Welfare Department launched three employment assistance projects last October.

Survey reveals more interest in contract work

A new generation of "motivated movers" is emerging as more people consider contract work, according to a global survey by recruitment firm Robert Walters. About 1,000 candidates from Britain, Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific responded to the survey conducted last month. More than a third of them said they would consider contract work to broaden their experience and exposure to different industries. Financial reasons for sticking with either permanent or contract work were not given. About a quarter of the respondents would consider moving from a permanent job to enjoy the more flexible hours and improved work-life balance that contract work offers.

MPF funds totalling HK\$110,000 recovered

The Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority has helped 18 employees recover a total of HK\$110,000 in MPF payments through the Small Claims Tribunal. Three of the companies were ordered last Tuesday to pay the authority between HK\$16,000 and HK\$45,000. Five other companies that did not appear at the hearing were ordered to pay a separate amount to the authority. The money will be reimbursed to the employees' MPF accounts.