



Assessment Centers Provide High-Potential Candidates With Hands-on Experience

When assessing candidates for promotion, it's often difficult to envision how people will function in a new job, especially one that takes them from the rank and file and thrusts them into a supervisory role for the first time.

Candidates, too, may not know what they're in for when they ask to be considered for a management position after years of success in more tactical positions.

The answer, both for employer and employee, is increasingly being found in assessment centers.

Developed by the federal government during the World War II as a way to identify candidates for undercover assignments, and subsequently adapted for corporate use in the 1950's as a way to select and develop talent within organizations, assessment centers are enjoying a resurgence today as businesses look for new and effective ways to evaluate high-potential candidates.

A Day in the Life

Generally speaking, assessment centers put participants through a series of group and individual exercises, interviews and tests designed to simulate the "day in the life" conditions of a management position, to determine if they have the skills and abilities necessary to perform jobs higher up the corporate ladder.

Assessment centers can vary based upon the specific leadership and management development needs of the company. Typically, about eight to 10 participants will attend at one time, and all receive a thorough introduction at the beginning of the day. The center lasts a full day and often a second day is spent by the assessors to gather, organize and then provide feedback to the participants. Some examples of the simulations include the following:

- An "in basket" exercise that consists of e-mails and voicemail messages that participants must prioritize and answer.
- Written exercises, which evaluate communication skills.
- Role playing, which typically last between 15-20 minutes. During the session, professional assessors carefully track participants' behaviors.
- Analytical exercises that test participants' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Depending on the organization's business needs, other simulations may include a coaching session with an employee, giving a presentation or leading in a team meeting. Increasingly, companies also use assessment centers to evaluate candidates' abilities to



function as leaders or members of a global "virtual team," with participants from different countries and time zones.

'Wonderful Tool'

"Assessment centers are a wonderful tool, not only for selection, but also for development," says Valerie White, a member of WJM Associates' executive coaching faculty. "They give both the sponsoring organization and the participants a real taste of what a new job is like. They are incredibly eye-opening experiences."

Participants receive feedback regarding their performance and typically will work with an assessor to create a development plan, once their strengths and areas for development are identified. Participants typically also receive an individual assessment report, which summarizes their feedback, strengths and areas for development. Additional information that may be found in the report includes feedback from an assessment instrument and/or from a 360-degree survey.

Assessment centers are common in industries with large sales forces, including the pharmaceutical industry. Some companies in these sectors conduct their own assessment centers; others work with human resources consulting firms.

Case Study

Recently, WJM Associates helped a large company that provides highly capable, motivated contract sales and management personnel to the pharmaceutical industry. These sales and marketing professionals have extensive experience in various therapeutic categories and successfully market primary care and specialty drugs in all phases of the product life cycle.

To meet its growing demand for more sales managers, the client conducted its own assessment center. Instead of using outside assessors, the company filled those roles from within -- and asked WJM Associates to provide four local consultants, experienced in running assessment centers, to coach the in-house assessors.

WJM Associates' consultants provided ongoing support by keeping assessors focused and on track, redirecting role-players, and helping to prepare written reports. As a result, discussions were brought to a potentially new and different level.

In addition, WJM Associates provided the client with a number of suggestions for improving the effectiveness of future assessment centers. These included:

- Encouraging "role players" to stay in character when entering the room to begin the role-play exercise. This eliminates confusion for all involved and also saves time.



- Providing participants with a greater understanding of the company's key leadership competencies, and including specific examples of strengths and developmental opportunities.
- Debriefing with assessors to share challenges and "best practices" after their sessions. One consultant, for example, had three assessors address the same issue differently.

"Our client found these and other suggestions to be very helpful in enhancing its assessment-center process," says Scott Litchfield, WJM Associates account manager. "They liked the experience and professionalism that our faculty members brought to the assignment, and felt that they enriched the process tremendously."