

Guidelines on Best Practice Assessment Methods for use in Recruitment & Selection

Introduction

Panels should carefully consider the assessment methods to be used in any selection process and determine whether, in addition to an interview, the use of other assessment methods would provide useful information.

These Guidelines and associated Tool Kit are intended to help panels understand various best practice methods of assessment and choose the right approach in each case. They include:

- Simplest methods
- Ability tests
- Presentations
- Job simulation (work sample) exercises, including:
 - presentations,
 - written exercises,
 - in-tray exercises,
 - group discussions exercises,
 - role-play exercises
- Occupational Personality/ Customer Contact questionnaires
- Full Assessment Centres (using multiple techniques assessed by multiple assessors)

Why use Additional Assessment Methods

A well conducted interview should form the basis of every selection process, but it does have limitations because no matter how skilled the interview process is, it can still only collect self-reported information from the candidate, for example:

The panel might ask a candidate to give examples of problems they have tackled and explore their knowledge of problem solving techniques, but an assessment exercise which allows the candidate to demonstrate this ability in practice is likely to be more informative.

Safer and Fairer

Additional methods of assessment can, therefore:

- improve the quality and quantity of information on which to base the selection decision
- allow candidates to demonstrate how they meet requirements, rather than relying on self-report and performance at interview.

No perfect method of assessment exists, but the most effective way of predicting job performance is to use a *mix* of assessment methods and look at the results in an integrated way to build up a picture of the candidate. At the simplest level, this may involve no more than looking at examples of candidate's past work (e.g. for a post which requires experience in producing clear and concise Committee reports, or information leaflets, publicity materials or instruction manuals). At its most complex and sophisticated it might be a full Assessment Centre using a range of tests and exercises for Senior Management positions.

Panels need to decide if it is appropriate to use additional assessment techniques beyond the interview. Think about the job level, the pool of candidates you need to attract and the criteria you need to assess against. For many jobs, the interview alone will be the most appropriate approach.

- For many basic level operative and clerical jobs, particularly where there is a constant need to recruit, the best method is to use the Fast Track to Interview approach, where all interested job seekers are automatically invited to interview, helped if necessary to complete a simplified application form and interviewed against the person specification without delay as the only method of assessment.
- Recruitment initiatives targeting jobs to unemployed residents should not use methods of assessment beyond the interview, unless this is strictly essential. The interview should be conducted in as informal and encouraging way as possible.
- It is not appropriate to use a battery of assessment techniques for jobs requiring basic level skills. Rather than enhance the outcome, this is more likely to put potential applicants off.
- Never use assessment tools for their own sake. Selection decisions will only be enhanced if the assessment tool is really needed to get at information that cannot be obtained otherwise.

When is it appropriate?

Using a range of assessment tools for more senior jobs may well prove a cost effective investment and will feel far more fair and professional to candidates than an interview alone. In addition, the following factors may help you decide the right approach for the job you are filling:

- **The Costs of a Poor Appointment** (finance, management time, workforce morale, stress and absenteeism, ability to achieve service goals). The organisational costs will increase in proportion to the responsibility of the post and its intended impact on the area of service. The higher the risk, the more important it is to apply additional rigour to help achieve a reliable and safe appointment.
- **High turnover** Is this due, for example, to the nature of the role, such as the pressure of working in a demanding front-line service? If you have evidence this is the root of poor retention and it cannot be fully resolved by redesigning the job, this may well inform the development of a more sophisticated assessment process to help identify people most suited to working in such an environment. This may significantly improve retention, and thus reduce costs and absences.
- **To assess aptitude for success** This may be particularly important where considerable organisational investment will be given to developing recruits and it is necessary to assess their aptitude for success on the development or training programme (e.g. Graduate Recruitment Scheme; Young Worker Scheme; Personnel Trainee Scheme).

Getting the Basics Right **Quality Standards and Preparatory Steps**

In all cases ensure that:

The choice and construction of each assessment method flows from the requirements of the job;

- The Job description and Person Specification have been reviewed and are up-to-date
- Tasks in assessment exercises compare with tasks found in the job;
- Tests and exercises assess requirements for the job, at the right level to do the job
- When using a newly devised test or exercise, wherever possible pilot it with a group of existing employees in the area of work. This can show up unintended difficulties which can be ironed out before it is used in the selection process.
- Always offer feedback on test and exercise results.

Never just reuse tests or exercises without reviewing their effectiveness in the past.

Integrating the results

Never make a selection decision on the basis of a single tests or exercise results. The results from interviews and all other methods of assessment used must be integrated before a final decision is reached on the overall assessment of candidates.

Meeting the Needs of Disabled Candidates

Before using any test or assessment exercise, always consult in advance with disabled candidates about adjustments they will need to the test arrangements, materials or equipment required to ensure they get a fair assessment equal to other candidates. If it is not possible to make the required adjustments or supply necessary equipment/materials, drop the method of assessment for all applicants and devise an alternative method.

The Toolkit of assessment techniques contains details of how and when to use the most commonly used assessment methods.

Ability Tests

These assess technical skills only, not soft skills or behavioural styles. They are different from assessment exercises which may simultaneously assess a range of skills, knowledge and underlying personal styles/ behavioural competencies. Tests have right and wrong answers and candidates' achieve a score out of the total. Candidates may be required to write down the correct answer to questions, or choose what they think is right from a number of possible answers provided (multiple choice tests).

Home-grown or Off the Shelf Tests?

There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches:

Tests designed in-house require no financial outlay. Managers who know the job well and/or have been involved in the job analysis can focus on the right skills required and design simple tests to assess against these. These can be administered by the panel or a dedicated administrator. However, caution is needed because of the various factors which can influence the results i.e. time allowed, administration, quality of instructions, job relevance of contents, candidate preparation, interpretation of results.

In-house designed tests are best limited to the less complex range of skills e.g. typing speed and accuracy tests; basic spelling and grammar, basic numeracy. For more complex skill testing, it is safer to use good quality, standardised tests. Panels who do design their own tests are advised to first verify these with a suitably skilled Departmental Personnel Officer.

Published Standardised Tests

Standardised tests, designed and published by experts in occupational psychology, have been used to good effect for recruitment to a number of key positions in the City Council over the past five years. However they carry costs and **may only be administered, scored and interpreted by people qualified and registered to do so under the British Psychological Society.**

The City Council only uses standardised tests which are:

- published by reputable companies
- have published validity evidence
- provide representative comparison group data for benchmarking results
- have clear equal opportunities guidelines recognised by the CRE, DDA and EOC
- can be provided in alternative accessible formats.

From the perspective of consistent reliability, validity, objectivity and fairness, good quality published occupational ability tests offer distinct advantages. They aim to maximise objectivity **by standardising** on test conditions; instructions; time; content; scoring; and interpretation.

The main categories of Occupational Ability Tests of relevance to jobs in the City Council are:

Verbal: from attainment tests of spelling and grammar for clerical jobs to tests of verbal critical reasoning for managers and graduates

Numerical: from basic tests of simple arithmetic calculations for process workers to numerical critical reasoning tests where inferences need to be drawn from business data.

Mechanical: present a series of mechanical problems, usually in pictorial form which need to be solved by the candidate. Designed for assessment of a wide range of skilled apprentice and engineering occupations.

Diagrammatic: tests of logical reasoning ability presented in the form of abstract shapes and diagrams. Useful in occupations like data processing.

Spacial: Assesses ability to imagine the rotation of shapes in space. Relevant to design and occupations which require an understanding of how parts of equipment fit together.

Clerical: measuring speed and accuracy in checking for errors in lists, computer printouts etc. Also covers certain filing and classification skills.

Qualified staff in Corporate Personnel can choose, administer, score and interpret a range of standardised ability and aptitude tests for senior appointments. A database of all qualified staff in Departments will also be developed. **Use of published occupational ability tests must be approved in all cases. Contact your Departmental Personnel Officer.**

Job Simulation Exercises

What are they?

These are job related assessment tools which allow candidates to demonstrate how they meet certain requirements in practice. They are best designed in-house and are good for assessing behavioural competencies as well as application of relevant skills and knowledge.

They are sometimes called “work sample” exercises and they generally provide the best assessment of candidate’s competencies in action. They have good ‘face validity’ because they so obviously mirror the actual roles an employee may have to perform in the job. Commonly used simulation exercises include:

- Presentations
- Written Exercises
- In-Tray Exercises
- Role-plays
- Group Discussions
- Case-Studies

These are all explained in more detail below.

DOs and Don’ts

- Off-the-shelf simulation exercises are best avoided as these will not be job and organisation specific.
- They should be designed to match the kinds of role and function which postholders may be required to carry out in the job. Wherever possible their content should be based on issues which are actually ‘live’ for the organisation.
- Group Exercises and Role-Plays require skilled expertise for their design and implementation and should only be used with the support and input of a suitably skilled Personnel Officer.

Presentations

Presentations can be used to good effect without the need for complex exercise design by the panel. They are simple to plan, can be incorporated into the start of the interview and panels often use them as the only method of assessment in addition to the interview. They must only be used where this level of formal communication is job relevant. Examples of requirements which may be assessed are:

- **Oral communication** e.g. persuasiveness; verbal fluency and confidence in formal situations; ability to sell ideas or concepts or communicate vision (important in any leadership role); ability to analyse and articulate complex information in easily understood terms (this might involve them reading a complex document, e.g. a government circular, legal regulation, statistical data).
- **Specific areas of knowledge** required for the job.
- **Planning and organising** assessed by how well the candidate structures the presentation and uses the limited time resource to get key messages across. In addition, the brief itself may focus on a planning task such as dealing with a change

management issue and presenting a proposed long-term plan for achieving key organisational goals.

- **Strategic thinking and breadth** e.g. the topic design may assess the extent to which candidates are aware of the external environment and its impact on the organisation (i.e. political, legislative, demographic, financial, technological); it may be designed to assess the extent to which candidates take in the bigger picture, can propose innovative solutions, seek to work across functional boundaries and through partnerships.

Options for the Presentation

In all cases, specify in advance the allowed time candidates will have for delivering their presentation (usually 10 minutes will be appropriate).

- i) Give candidates the topic on arrival and ask them to prepare a presentation, within a specified timescale, to be delivered at the start of the interview. This will also help assess ability to work to clear deadlines. The topic must be relevant to an area of knowledge, awareness, understanding or expertise required for the job. Be clear how long you will allow for the presentation. Provide them with any materials and equipment they will need, such as a flip chart, pens or an overhead projector and acetates.
- ii) Send candidates the topic in advance and ask them to come prepared with their presentation on the day. This will enable candidates to research the topic more thoroughly, thus gaining a better assessment of their external awareness and ability to gather and draw upon relevant information for a specific organisational purpose. It will also enable them to develop quality presentation materials so you will gain a better assessment of their skill in this area. Candidates should be asked to inform the panel in advance what equipment they will require to deliver their presentation.

Written Exercises

These can be very useful for assessing against relevant requirements without involving expensive officer time in intensive assessment processes. They are often used as the only method of assessment in addition to the interview. They can also be used to good effect as part of a full Assessment Centre.

Options

- i) Send shortlisted candidates the exercise brief to complete in advance of the interview and return by a specified date. Specify the acceptable length of responses (e.g. no more than 500 words). The panel can then assess each candidate's exercise prior to interview, ready for integration into the overall panel assessments against the full person specification at the end. Consult with disabled candidates on whether they need to submit their exercise in an alternative format.
- ii) Candidates are given the exercise brief on the day of the interview, which they complete under timed conditions. Decide and inform candidates in advance whether they will be supplied with a pc/ laptop for this purpose or expected to complete the task by hand (job requirements and job level will help determine this). If by hand, supply response sheets for the exercise, pens, pencils, rubbers, calculators if necessary). Don't allow some to do the exercise electronically and others by hand unless this is

needed as a reasonable adjustment for a disabled candidate. Ensure the access needs of individual disabled candidates are identified in advance, and accommodated on the day.

Kinds of Requirement? Aside from assessing written skill at the right level, written exercises can assess a range of other requirements, for example:

- external awareness (e.g. key current issues facing local authorities); planning and organising; problem solving; analysing and interpreting complex data; concern for service quality; ability to produce succinct briefing notes or Committee reports; adaptability of style to suit the audience, technical knowledge.
- alternatively, it may only be required to assess candidates' ability to produce simple memos, letters or clear written instructions, in which case this will inform the design of the exercise.

• In-Tray Exercises

What are they & how do they work?

In-trays simulate the types of demands and day-to-day issues an employee may face in actually doing the job. They typically require candidates to sit at a desk and sort through an 'in-tray' of paperwork, usually including 12 - 15 items (rough guide only), consisting of a mixture of memos, letters, telephone messages, e-mails, and other documents relevant to the job for which they are applying. Participants are set time to read the documents and state what priorities they would make and what action they would take in each situation.

Advantages

- reasonably straightforward to develop
- can either be undertaken by all candidates at the same time or individually at staggered times in the assessment timetable.
- enable candidates to demonstrate a range of different job specific competencies.

What kind of Requirements can be assessed?

Depending on the nature of the job and the design of the contents, examples may include:

Problem analysis and solving skills	Concern for customers	Performance management	Written communication	
Time management & prioritisation	Responsiveness	Technical knowledge	Planning and organising	
Delegation skills & decisiveness	Leadership style and motivational skills	Coalition or partnership building skills	Strategic thinking and breadth	
Concern for quality and equality	Skill in the officer/Member interface			
Will not assess social skills such as Face-to-face interpersonal	Ability to negotiate effectively	Verbal communication	Managing group dynamics	Prominence in groups

sensitivity

When might they be used?

They are often included within an Assessment Centre, but may also be used to good effect as part of a less complex 'extended interview' approach for jobs at appropriate level. Be sure that the in-tray contents are job relevant and designed to assess the range of competencies, behaviours and skills required for the job.

Examples of In-tray design

- i) Require candidates to prioritise their actions by listing what they would do in response to in-tray items, and in what order, on an answer sheet. They may be advised to do so in bullet point form.
- ii) For a more sophisticated version of the above, provide candidates with their day's 'diary' of meetings and commitments, together with items requiring attention in the in-tray and introduce a new scenario which requires their immediate attention. This will help assess time-management skills, ability to re-prioritise under changing circumstances, meet deadlines under pressure, decision-making, problem-solving, leadership and delegation skills.
- iii) If part of the selection criteria is written communication, instruct the candidates, for example, to compose letters, memos, a briefing note for Senior management or the Executive Member
- iv) If a key area of criteria is problem solving and analysis, the in-tray items might be designed to collectively explain a problem:- participants have to sort through all the contents and piece together the information to understand the problem and propose solutions. Alternatively, you might require candidates to develop timescaled action plans for dealing with a series of separate problems presented in the in-tray.
- v) Concern for quality may be assessed by the way candidate's respond to a service user complaint. Appropriate management skills may be assessed, for example, through inclusion of a grievance, a complaint of harassment or report showing unacceptable levels of absence levels in the relevant section.

Checklist for Designing the In-tray Exercise

- Be clear about the criteria to be assessed
- Identify the main work related problems or issues to which participants will be asked to respond.
- Collect or design relevant data and materials, e.g. Memos, letters, statistics, short reports, Government Circulars etc. These will form the basis of your exercise.
- Prepare a clear brief for participants. This should explain the exercise and what they have to do, including:
 - their assumed "name" for the purpose of the exercise (the addressee on all correspondence);
 - their assumed role or job title (usually the job for which they are applying);
 - an explanation of what the exercise involves (e.g. dealing with the in-tray of the named person, which consists of memoranda, letters, reports, e-mails and other documents).
 - the context: e.g. the time of day; how much time they have before going to their 'next appointment' (this will make the time allowance feel more real); any other

contextual information, such as what has happened immediately prior to the start time.

- basic additional guidance, e.g. “write legibly, explain assumptions made, keep responses brief and to the point, write in bullet points if this will help you”.

Ask your Personnel Officer to verify your exercise before implementation.

Role Play Exercises

What are they?

These simulate the type of encounter a person needs to handle in the job and assesses the skills, knowledge and behavioural competencies required for performing the role well. Role plays can be useful for assessing skills and behaviours such as interpersonal communication, negotiation and persuasive skills, concern for customer care, dealing with conflict, handling difficult employees, investigating complaints (perhaps of a sensitive nature); conducting a disciplinary investigation; conducting a return to work interview or a capability interview, conducting a trade union negotiation.

They are observed by the panel who need to be fully agreed and briefed on the behaviours they are assessing against prior to commencement, and use a clear rating system for scoring the candidates against each of the requirements. The non-candidate part of the role-play can be taken by a member(s) of the panel or an external officer(s) brought in and briefed to perform the role as required.

Therefore, the design and implementation of role plays can be a little complex and does require quite a lot of planning and preparation. Nevertheless, for the right job and the right requirements, they can prove a fairly reliable assessment tool.

Group Discussion Exercises

What are they?

These are observed exercises using a number of assessors, specially trained for the role. They involve usually four or five candidates brought together to work to a specific brief. As for role-plays, Group Exercises enable applicants to demonstrate competencies in action through observable behaviour in a job relevant situation. They can be highly effective for assessing a range of management skills and behavioural competencies. Below are some examples only:

Interpersonal Sensitivity	Managing Group Dynamics	Cross-functional working	Concern for service quality
Planning & Organising	Face-to-face Communication	Coalition Building	Commitment to Equality & Social Inclusion
Presence in Groups	Influencing skills	Partnership Working	
Social Confidence	Negotiation Skills	Leadership & Motivation	Resource management
Flexibility	Creativity/innovation	Team working/Team Building	
	Active Listening		

When should they be used?

Group exercises are not appropriate for day-to-day recruitment. All candidates must be available at the same time, so the exercise will not fit with a normal interview schedule timed for staggered candidate arrivals.

They are suitable for assessing more senior job candidates, graduates trainees or professions where interpersonal skill, self-awareness and ability to handle group dynamics is vital for success in the role. Their use is usually reserved for Assessment Centres where the nature of the job is such that:

- the most rigorous assessment methods are to be applied to ensure the best possible recruitment decision;
- overall assessment is being made against a competency framework with defined behavioural dimensions (see section on Assessment Centres) ;
- the exercise can be timetabled into the process relatively easily.

Important Considerations

The reliability of the exercise can be influenced by:

- the quality of the competency framework,
- the preparation and skill of the assessors
- the job relevance of the exercise brief

The discomfort some candidates feel about the 'goldfish bowl' experience is usually quickly overcome in the first few minutes

The design of Group Exercises is complex and should only be tackled by officers with the relevant skill and expertise. They are costly to run in terms of officer time, requiring the right number of trained and well prepared assessors, at the right job/expertise level to observe and score the candidates (ideally on a ratio of 1:1; at least a ratio of 1:2) .

Types of Group Exercises

- **Leaderless Groups**

Candidates all receive the same brief and are required to collectively carry out a particular task within a time limit (e.g. discuss and identify on a flip chart the key components of a change-management plan). They are asked not to appoint a Chair and are left to decide for themselves how the task is to be tackled and who is to do what.

- **Assigned Role Group Exercises**

All candidates work on the same problem but each is assigned a different area of organisational responsibility with a set of desired outcomes. The discussion can enable particular observation of candidates' negotiation skills, multi-functional and/or partnership working; persuasion and influencing skills and a range of interpersonal skills.

- **Group Discussion and Presentation Exercises**

Candidates are each assigned a different problem or issue and is allocated a set time to present the issues to the rest of the group setting out their proposed strategy for dealing with it. Group discussion follows each presentation before moving onto the next issue

presentation. The discussion can be brought to a close each time by the intervention of an assessor when it is considered to have sufficiently run its course.

Panels wishing to develop a group exercise must first consult their Personnel Officer for close assistance and verification of design and content. The Personnel Strategies and Change Management Team in Corporate Personnel can assist on a consultancy basis given time and other priorities at the time of requests.

Occupational Personality Questionnaires

OPQs are designed to assess the typical or preferred behaviour of individuals in a way that is relevant to the world of work. They provide a profile of an individual's preferred styles of behaviour using a self-report inventory. The inventory reflects personality style, not skills or abilities.

Candidates generally feel quite relaxed completing an OPQ as part of an assessment process - there are no time limitations, only the need to progress at a steady pace. These are not tests and there are no right and wrong answers. They should never be used as the deciding factor in a selection process. Information from an individual's profile can be used in combination with the results from other assessment methods to provide a summary of likely strengths and limitations against the specified job requirements and to provide a basis for further probing at interview.

Interpretation of personality profiles is a highly skilled process and requires full training under a provider approved by the British Psychological Society (BPS). **Suitable questionnaires must only be chosen, administered, scored and interpreted by people registered with the BPS and qualified to Level B in psychometric assessment.** Feedback to candidates completing an Occupational Personality Inventory is always important and again, this should only be done by a qualified practitioner. Qualified staff in Corporate Personnel are available to fulfil this role for senior appointments.

The most detailed versions of the OPQ 32, for example, divides personality into 30 scales representing aspects of typical behaviour concerned with relationships with people, thinking style and emotions. From the basic profile can be generated more detail such as reporting styles, team types, emotional intelligence, management competency profiles. Shorter versions are also available for non-managerial staff and for specific areas of work, e.g. Customer Contact Styles questionnaire for sales and customer service staff.

When should they be used?

Their use is most appropriate when integrated within a full Assessment Centre or for jobs where there is a definite need to identify behaviours most suitable to the nature of the job.

Assessment Centres

What is an Assessment Centre?

This is not a place but a process designed to assess candidates against the key job criteria in as rigorous way as possible. It involves a systematic approach to identifying precisely what is required for success in a particular job and identifying from this a carefully defined set of assessment criteria (the behavioural dimensions), which flow from the person specification.

Assessment Centres use all the techniques which may be applied in an 'interview plus' approach, but go much further. They have been shown time and again through validation research to be more valid than any other Assessment Technique for identifying candidates who will be successful in the job.

They are very resource hungry so are only suitable for jobs with the highest responsibilities and impact on organisational success.

Multiple assessment techniques

An Assessment Centre combines multiple assessment techniques and each area of competence is assessed through multiple measures. Candidates who may not do well against one area of competency in one exercise, but better in another, will achieve a balanced score at the end, providing a more rounded, thorough and fair assessment.

Multiple assessors

All the exercises are scored by a team of trained assessors who, at the end of the process (the final diagnostic stage) pool their individual scores to achieve an agreed assessment of each candidate.

The logic behind the approach is that the best way to find out if a person has the competence to perform successfully in a job is to capture the essence of the job in a set of simulations and other exercises. Their performance should be predictive of their behaviour in the actual job.

Stages in their Construction

- Produce the Competency framework and behavioural dimensions
- Describe the behavioural dimensions in terms of observable skills, knowledge and behaviours
- Design a series of tests and exercises to measure these dimensions in action
- Produce a guide and design training for the assessors
- Identify the right number of assessors at the right level of responsibility and expertise to carry out the role effectively
- Produce a timetable for the event
- Book a suit of rooms and necessary equipment for carrying out all the assessment
- Produce assessment guides and design training for the assessors
- Book refreshments for the day
- Design all relevant stationary

