



Appraisal of Assessment Centre as Management Tool for Personnel Selection

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Abstract

Human resource is an evolving field in organizations' management and administration. Thus the possibility of innovation and creativity cannot be overestimated for the purpose of avoiding being outdated or suffer entropy. One of the innovative and creative efforts towards effective, efficient and continuous relevance of management which are the basic features of any purpose-driven and result – oriented organization, is the utilization of assessment centre as a managerial tool for personnel selection. This paper made use of secondary sources of data to examine the tool, its main features, variation and how it can be effectively utilized as a managerial tool. In conclusion, selection tools and their inclusions in what is known as assessment centre is a testimony that assessment centre is "all in one. It recommends that there is need to design a clear and concise competency framework to guide assessors on what they are assessing.

Keywords: Assessment centre, managerial tool, organization, personnel selection

Introduction

The search for able hands to uphold the vision and mission of organizations, irrespective of their sectors, has made it imperative for them to always engage in recruitment and training exercise. Many organizations have had cause to lay off their employees, through disengagement, early retirement or retrenchment, every year, a practice which has almost become a norm rather than exception. One of the reasons usually cited for this action is unsatisfactory performance of the affected employees which obviously may manifest in redundancy, untrainability and or inability to meet target. This exercise normally cut across the different cadres in organizations – junior, middle and senior. Management staff members are even affected in some crucial and critical cases. This situation has led to high turnover of employees with its attendant consequences such as cost of advertising for replacements, payment of severance packages, payment for temporary employees to fill the gap until new hands are hired, training costs accompanied with background checks and health assessments for those shortlisted.

In analyzing the effect of hiring a wrong person Vincent (2015) said that productive hours are wasted on payroll processing; sourcing new candidates; responding to job enquiries and applications which are usually enormous; orientation and training and frequent payroll adjustment. This has been corroborated by Osibogun (2015) who was of the view that the employers might have had inadequate knowledge of the competencies required for the vacant positions. According to her the insincerity of applicants who stated fake competencies in their resumes and were eventually discovered to be incapable to perform on the job is a critical factor. She noted that the desperation of the applicants to get the job will usually make them to state the required competencies only for them to fail to perform when the reality sets in.

Also, Oke (2015) in a similar dimension was of the view that, first, the mistake people make during recruitment can be likened to a shaky foundation on which the building cannot stand the test of time. This, according to him is because when people want to recruit, the need for job description cannot be stepped down. The task, he concluded has to do with good human resource planning for where there is bad planning, other things would be affected negatively.

In the foregoing scenario what is left is to go and source for specification for people with the requisite competence and qualities that will match the job description. This calls for professionalism and transparency as human resource experts have the tendency to surreptitiously introduce sentiments and

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emotions and tend to adjust the job to suit the person. Meanwhile, the best way is to source for the best person fit for the job. Thus, the employer requires to exercise patience until the right person is discovered. Oke (2015) criticized the practice whereby employers lay emphasis on paper qualifications at the expense of the appropriate skills and the right attitude which are sine qua non for good performance. Therefore, he advised that every job interview panel need to focus on skill set and attitude, noting that the attention of the interviewer are usually on the institution attended by the interviewee – old generation versus new generation universities, federal versus state universities, polytechnic versus university graduates, private versus government universities, e.t.c., at the expense of a deep observation and critical deep examination of the availability or non – availability of the needed skills.

In essence the process of personnel selection should be deep, rigorous and technical in nature – a departure from the traditional practice of examining the applicants' resumes and asking questions to determine their suitability. This becomes expedient considering the multifarious problems confronting organizations – economic predicament occasioned by lingering political crises and multitudes of graduates from tertiary institutions, mostly from developing world, who are desperately seeking for job opportunities in an ever changing dynamic business environment with stiff competition (Oke, 2015).

Personnel Selection

Personnel selection refers to the determination of human resources need for a particular task through various means. It is the process adopted to hire individuals into a system. The selection could be done through widely known methods or specially designed styles for such an exercise. In other words, the uniqueness of the desired target determines the method to be employed. Personnel selection basically has to do with the issue of fitting the right man to the right job.

Muchinsky (2012) confirmed that the term personnel selection, although can apply to all aspects of the process of recruitment, selection, hiring, acculturation and other likes, the most common meaning focuses on the selection of workers. In this regards, selected ones are separated from rejected applicants with the intention of choosing those who will be the most successful who will add values to the organization to achieve its objectives. There is no doubting the fact that the effectiveness in terms of the ability to meet up with set goals of an organization depends largely on several factors such as the political climate, socio-cultural climate, economic environment, government policies and lots more.

Assessment Centre (AC)

Contrary to what the name implies or suggests Assessment Centre (AC) is beyond a physical location, spot or an arena. It is not a place but a highly sophisticated method of identifying and developing managerial potentials. It involves assessment in groups and by groups. This method can be used for all levels of management selection processes but the most common usage is at the middle level manpower. Assessment Centre (AC) is a process where candidates are assessed to determine their suitability for specific types of employment, especially management or military command. The candidates' personality and aptitudes are determined by a variety of techniques including interviews, group exercises, examinations and psychometric testing.

Standardized Test

A standardized exam is a test that is given and scored in a manner that is consistent to ensure that the results can be defended in court. This is in contrast to a test that is not standardized, which tends to be flexible in terms of both its scope and its structure, as well as varied in terms of both its difficulty and its relevance. The second possibility may serve as a humorous warm-up for the first possibility. The questions, circumstances for administering scoring techniques, and interpretations on standardized tests are meant to be consistent with one another, and the tests' results are produced and scored in a predetermined, uniform manner. On the other hand, non-standardized tests present materially distinct situations and evaluate the subjects in a variety of ways. It's possible, for instance, that one group will be given less time to finish the

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test than the group that comes after them, or that the identical answer would be counted as correct for one applicant but as incorrect for another candidate.

Conditions and Process for Assessment Centre

The need for assessment centre is premised on certain features and criteria. The size and structure of an organisation is very important to ensure that the desired result is achieved. It is usually employed by big organisations with formal structure. However, it is possible for two or more organisations within the same sector or with similar objectives or targets to team up and organise an assessment for selection. This is why a set of people who attend the same AC exercises are eventually posted or hired by different organisations. Closely related to this is the financial capacity of the organisation. AC as a tool is costly and mostly cannot be accommodated by small or medium outfits. Thus, it should be established, prior to its implementation, who bears the cost. It could be borne by the consultants who must have included the cost in their bills; or the organisation. If two or more organisations are involved they may also decide to share the cost at an agreed ratio or percentage. In addition to this is the consideration for the cost benefit analysis of the exercise. What will eventually be the benefit of the scheme to the organisers, participants, the community or the society at large? Why does the organisation need to set up an assessment centre? These and other questions are to be analysed and considered before embarking on the exercise. Another fundamental factor is the availability of competent hands to handle the exercise. They are supposed to be professionals who are competent and cannot be easily swayed by emotion or allowed sentiment or passion to becloud their sense of reasoning and judgement.

Also, they are expected to be impartial assessors with discerning ability and third eye to examine and identify potentials at the shortest possible time. According to Kloper and Davidson (1962) it requires a wealth of knowledge concerning personality dynamics generally as well as considerable experience to identify and interpret personality. There is also the need to determine the behavioural traits to be assessed by the assessors. This will go a long way to determine the qualities of the assessors themselves and what to look for in the assessors. Is it the leadership ability, style, instincts or traits? It would be team spirit, negotiation skills, or creativity skill. This is very important and closely related to job analysis prior to the commencement of assessment centre. A deep understanding and knowledge of all these would assist in the preparation of the choice of the instruments and the dimension of behaviour to be assessed. It will also help to determine the duration and cost of the exercise.

Interview

This is one of the techniques of assessment centre which can vary in structure and involve probing into the background of the applicant. It is a conversation between two or more people – parties: assessor(s) and assessee(s), where questions are asked to elicit facts or statements from the assessee(s) or interviewee(s) (<http://www.merriam-wbster.com/dictionary>) (Interview). The basic aim of the exercise is to understand the experiences, the background and the mindset of the applicant, the knowledge of which will inform and guide the interviewer(s) to have a relatively deep insight to form the basis of comprehensive report on the assessee(s).

Interview serves several purposes amongst which are: the determination of the present temperamental attitude of assessee(s) the rate of speed of logical thinking ability and the composure nature amongst others. The session could vary in standard and interpretation so also its context and content. The programme however, determines the number of interview session, as it could be more than once. The nature and structure of the interview schedule determines whether the interviewer(s), who is/are expected to be tactful, sensitive, and well trained, would have the opportunity to, probe or ask follow up questions since it provides the opportunity of face to face interaction between two persons or group of persons.

The technique of interview reduces conflicts though time consuming and resource intensive. It is generally easier for the interviewee, especially if what is sought are opinions or / and impressions. Also, the interviewer is expected to exhibit some degree of expertise and maturity which should manifest in listening,

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asking of follow up question, if need be, for clarifications, respectful of boundaries, warring of leading questions, avoidance of interruption and making participant comfortable (Seidman, 1998).

Interview session is useful as it reveals an in-depth detail from the interviewee, whose response to request to paint a picture of an event, could give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language of the interviewee can give him away to show an otherwise hidden interrelatedness between emotions, people and objects which cannot be detected by other techniques (Weiss, 1994).

Objective Test

When tests are in objective form scores are assigned to discrete answers usually in multiple choice forms. The primary aim is to measure the assessee on either or all of the following: knowledge, mental ability, skills, attitude, value, interests, aptitude, physical fitness, personality variables, intelligent quotient and a host of other variables. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/test>) Numerical Reasoning (NR) tests are the most popular family members of objectives tests which is common in almost every selection process. Numerical reasoning and numerical critical reasoning tests assess an individual's ability to identify trends across a wide range of data and combine statistics from different sources to establish new information patterns (www.psychometric.sucess.com)

The test may be administered verbally on paper, on a computer, or in a confined area which requires the assessee to perform a set of skills, physically. In other words test varies in style and requirement as well as dimension. For example assessee might be allowed to make use of supplementary tools such as four figure table, calculator or reference books to respond to an item. Meanwhile, in another dimension they might be expected to rely on memory to respond to some other items. The most important thing is the validity of the instrument and the consciousness of the assessors to ensure that the exercise is hitch-free, devoid of any iota of bias.

Situational Judgement Tests (SJTS) or Situational Judgement Inventories (SJIs) or Situational Exercise (SE)

These are series of hypothetical management issues which the assessee are positioned to identify and handled as if they are real. Assessee are asked to come out with the most appropriate response or expected to rank the responses in the order they feel is most effective. The tests may be presented in writing, orally or by viewing a taped scenario on a television monitor (Lievens, Helga and Eveline, 2008). The problem may largely be technical or logistical, or it may centre on interpersonal or inter-group relations. This makes them to be distinct from other common knowledge based multiple choice item and what qualifies them to be adopted in industrial-organizational sociology and psychology applications for personnel selection (McDaniel and Whetzel, 2007).

According to Lievens et al., the first step in developing a situational judgement test is to conduct a job analysis. This analysis should include the collection of critical incidents, which can then be used to develop a variety of scenarios in which a prospective new hire will be required to exercise judgement. After these scenarios have been constructed, subject matter experts, who are exceptional workers, would be asked to provide solutions for the circumstance, both those that are effective and those that are less successful. Then, the evaluators would rank the choices from best to worst, and when it came time to score the exam, the highest rated alternatives would result in a better score for the responder, or a lower score if the test was scored in the other direction.

Projective Test

This is a personality test designed purposely for the participants, assessee, to respond with the opportunity to express their minds or feelings. It could be ambiguous or loosely structured, presumably revealing hidden emotions and internal conflicts projected by the person into the test. It differs from the objective test which is based on presuppositions about meaning. Projective test originated from psych-analytic psychology which posited that human beings possess both conscious and unconscious attitudes and motivation which

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are hidden or far beyond the conscious awareness. In essence, The mainframe is that responses to specific questions are consciously formulated and socially determined but they do not reflect the respondents' unconscious or implicit attitudes or motivations. The beauty of this tool, according to its advocates, is that the ambiguity of the stimuli presented within the tests allows the assesses to express thoughts that originate on a deeper level than what is captured by responsive tools, which are likely to lack appropriate items. In other words projective test reduces temptation to pretend or be hypocritical since it does not depend much on verbal abilities of the assesses. It takes into consideration both conscious and unconscious characteristics and attitude as it focuses more on clinical perspective 'what is' and not 'what ought to be'

There are various types of projective test. They are: Rorschach inkblot test, Draw-A-Person test (DAP), Sentence Completion test, Graphology test, Word Association Test (WAT), Picture Arrangement Test (PAT). Each of these tests is unique and has specifics but they are all to unearth and assess different personality traits of the participants.

Brainstorming: This is closely related to the situational exercise. It is a group or individual activity technique by which efforts are made to find a conclusion for a specific problem through the collection of a list of ideas spontaneously contributed by its members. It is believed that such instrument as brainstorming is an inevitable management tool as a means of enhancing divergent production of ideas aiming at facilitating problem solving through the maxim "quantity breeds quality". In other words, the number of ideas generated, the greater the chance of producing a radical and effective solution.

Brainstorming exercise is one of the tools under the assessment centre which involves participants handling an issue with all it takes to bring out the best of the solutions. Every member of the group is expected to contribute and at the end of the day the best option is adopted. It is a creativity technique whereby the assessors are out to measure the creative ability of the assesseees. The term was popularised by Osborn (1953) who claimed that brainstorming was more effective than individuals working alone in generating ideas. It was the outcome of his frustration of the inability of employees' inability to develop creative ideas on individual basis for advertisement campaigns. He started hosting and accommodating group thinking sessions and eventually discovered a quantum leap in the quality and quantity of ideas produced by employees.

The "T – Group": This is a discussion method often referred to as training group, sensibility – training group, human relations training group or encounter group. It is a "meeting of two eye to eye, face to face", a form of training with the goal of making people more aware of their own prejudices and more sensitive to others. T-group is a method of assessment involving assesseees in a small group, the subject matter of which is the behaviour of members who are expected to reflect on, interpret and evaluate the actions and reactions of others and themselves. Members are expected to freely express their reactions to aid interpretation of the behaviour of others (verbal and others) pointing out evidence of hostility, insecurity, defensive reactions and other behavioural dynamics. As a "training group", participants between eight and fifteen learn about themselves through their interaction with each other. They use feedback mechanism, problem solving and role play to gain insight into themselves (Rogers, 1969).

The group does not have an explicit agenda, structure or express goal but the assessor is basically interested in observing and measuring emotional reactions – anger, fear, warmth or envy, which may manifest or be exhibited by the assessee while responding to fellow group members' actions and statements. The emphasis is sharing emotions as against trading blames, accusations or buck-passing.

The method, according to Adler and Coleman (1975) was pioneered in mid 1940s by Moreno Protégé Kurt Lewin and his colleagues as a method of learning about human behaviour in what has become The National Training Laboratories (NTL). It was originally conceived as a research technique with a goal to change the standards, attitudes and behaviour of individuals, and it was considered by Rogers as "the most significant social invention of the century". This could be why industries and organizations have widely adopted its

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usage, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. It could as well be the origin of the current team building and corporate culture initiatives which have gained prominence in organization behaviour.

There are series of experimental studies with the aim of determining what effect, if any, participating in a T-group has on the participants, to which Adler and Coleman concluded that “those who had participated in a T-group showed significantly more change toward their selected goal than those who had not”.

Business or management games: Decision making with a different emphasis appears to be the main goal of these games as they are used in assessment centre. The games usually provide rather detailed information about a management or business of an organization. The information therein describes rules and relationships between processes, prices and departments. Assesseees are expected, amongst other things, to make decisions about prices, promotional campaigns, inventions, packaging and a host of others. The games vary from relatively modest cases to complex computer based programmes but, irrespective of their complexity, most of them operate on a few principles which once revealed, poses a challenge to the assesseees to outfit the limit of the game and even design another set of rules and principles. This invariably brings out the ingenuity of the assesseees.

In-basket test/exercise: This is basically an individual exercise except when hypothetical employees are to be handled. The assessee receives a set of mails, documents and calls-telephone with a limited timeframe within which to handle them. The aim of this method is to examine the assesseees’ talent in handling issues simultaneously. The various memos and mails are kept in the “in-basket” on the desk of the assesseees. They have to examine the issues and deal with them accordingly to the best of their individual knowledge. After the treatment, the mails are to be dropped in the “out-basket” tray. The assesseees may or may not be asked to justify reasons for how the mails were handled.

The exercise further gives the assessors a snapshot of the candidate’s ability to perform administrative or managerial functions of the position. It shows the time, management skill, writing, and priorities setting of the assesseees.

General Impacts of Assessment Centre

Assessment centre has significant impacts on organizations, assesseees, assessors and the society in general, since it is meant for the purpose of identifying the appropriate hands to drive the goals and aspirations of any organizations engaging in the exercise. It allows for identification of characteristics and behaviour which are difficult to identify through other means or any of the tools earlier discussed. This is due to its conglomeration of series of techniques in natural setting for thorough and analytical selection.

Since it is almost a practical affair assessment centre samples and aligns actual behaviour with test results and what the assesseees professes during interview. In other words, it serves as the basis for the confirmation of what the assesseees is and what he claims to be. Thus, it reveals differential psychology. In other words, it samples actual behaviour (simulated) not what test results indicate or what the assessee says he can do during the interview.

Assessment centre gives room for accuracy as group decision about performance of the assessee will definitely outweighs those of individuals. Assessors are expected to be professionals who in most cases are consultants with years of experience, whose judgments are supposed to be devoid of sentiments, biases and or influence by passion.

In addition, assessment centre validates the decisions of the assessors on the outcome of the exercise as it shows the rating of each participant and their strength and weaknesses are identified and probable solution proffered. In a situation where selected participants are recommended with some corrective reservations, the organization might take up challenge to bridge the identified knowledge or skill gaps. This could be done through appropriate training programmes to fine tune such selected participants. In other words, it facilitates decisions associated with the developmental potentials of the assesseees. Even where a participant is not selected, he might be recommended for a higher responsibility for it might be discovered the person or a particular person is above the post for which recruitment is being carried out.

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Other Uses of Assessment Centre

The assessment centre process according to Kennedy (2012) is used for all kinds of roles and for people at different stages of their career including graduate starter roles, corporate middle-management and executive roles, management selection as well as ongoing staff development and training. Apart from being a selection tool, assessment centre as a technique could equally be employed for determining promotion, elevation or assignment of responsibilities. Though, it was originally designed for selection into the middle management level, it has become popular to the extent that even medium organizations are utilizing its potent. A situation whereby few vacant positions are available and there are, on the face of it, many competent and qualified hands an organization may decide to use assessment centre if it is considered to be best option.

In the same way it could be used to determine those to be relieved of their appointments or those to be demoted or retired. This is possible at the end of the exercise whereby the reports of the team of assessors are thoroughly scrutinized and examined. A pre-determined cut-off mark could be established and those who fall below the mark are identified for retirement, redeployment or as the case may be. This is often the case where an organization is dwindling in productivity and profit which could call for general over-hauling and re-organization, most especially if it is imperative for a change within the sector in which such organization is associated.

Conclusion

The review of the various selection tools and their inclusions in what is known as assessment centre is a testimony that assessment centre is “all in one”. It is a process which incorporates many tools to achieve the goals of identifying the best among the assessees who is/are capable to fit into the available positions. The process includes identification of the needed skills, selection and designing of instruments to be used among many which depends on the needed skills. The assessor then invites potential assesses for observation and reporting. They are evaluated after which a feedback of the whole process is given and submitted by the assessors.

In essence, assessment centre has gone beyond the limit of recruitment into the managerial cadre as companies and organizations are known to be making use of it in assessing the personality and intellect of potential employees who are fresh from higher institutions with no working experience. Deloitte, Price water house Cooper (PWC), Ernst and Young (EY) and Klynueled Peat Marwick Geoerderler (KPMG) often referred to as “The Big Four” conduct Assessment Centre days to recruit their trainees. These are the four largest international professional services networks, offering audit, assurance, tax, and consulting, advisory, corporate finance and legal services. It is also on record that 72% of employers in the United States of America (USA) and 68% in the United Kingdom (UK) now make use of assessment centre as part of their recruitment and or promotion exercises. In essence, assessment centre has become a multipurpose tool in the field of personnel management and human resources most especially for big companies to quickly sort out the wheat from the chaff and that seems to be the reason it has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of assessment centre, its attributes, usefulness and conclusion, the following recommendations are made if its best is to be utilized

1. There is the need to design a clear and concise competency framework to guide assessors on what they are assessing.
2. Organizations or institutions should make it abundantly clear to new recruits so as not to believe the job or the organisation fits their values if, in fact it does not.
3. Required resources, in term of human and material, should be provided so as to get the best out of the exercise.
4. Competent and current professionals who are in tune with current realities in the area of human resource should be engaged in order to have a meaningful exercise.

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