Assessment Centers in the Public Sector: Best Practices and Lessons Learned

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Overview

- General assessment center guidelines and trends
- Challenges in the public sector
- Best practices
- Lessons learned
- Future directions
  - Technology-mediated simulation demo

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General Assessment Center Guidelines and Trends

Essential Elements for an Assessment Center*

1. Job analysis/ competency modeling

2. Behavioral classification

3. Link behaviors to dimensions to assessment techniques

4. Multiple assessments – elicit variety of dimension-relevant behaviors

5. Simulations

6. Multiple assessors evaluate each candidate

7. Assessor training

8. Systematic recording of behavior and scoring

9. Data integration (pooled from assessors or statistical integration)

Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations (International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines,2009)

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Common Practices and Recent Trends

- No "typical" assessment center method
  - Traditionally used "clinical" approach (e.g., end of day judgments)
  - Statistical or hybrid methods gaining support, particularly for decision making
- Traditionally, two primary assessment center purposes:
  - Individual development and selection/promotion

Relatively Recent Trends

- Integrate assessment centers into broader organizational strategies
  - Organizational development, team building
- Adapted for non-managerial jobs
- Competencies expanding to include broader types of dimensions
  - Personality (e.g., resilience); Interpersonal (e.g., cooperation, teamwork)
- Incorporating technology

References:
- Lievens, F., & Thornton, G. C. III (2005). Assessment centers: recent developments in practice and research. In A. Evers, O. Smit-Voskuijl, & N. Anderson (Eds.) *Handbook of Selection (pp. 243-264). Blackwell Publishing.*
- Thornton, G. C., III, & Rupp, D. E. (2006). *Assessment centers in human resource management: Strategies for prediction, diagnosis, and development.* New York: Psychology Press.

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Challenges in the Public Sector

Challenges in the Public Sector – Federal Examples

- Large-scale assessment
  - Process a lot of candidates as efficiently as possible while maintaining security of the exercises
    - Up to 400 candidates for 10 days
    - 40 candidates per day
    - 40 assessors per day

- Budget constraints
  - Costly to hire external assessors
  - Resource burden to use separate assessors and role players

- Logistical constraints
  - Length of work day constraints
  - Difficult to get dedicated time from high-level internal assessors
  - Tight development and implementation timelines (some agencies)
  - Internal assessors may know candidates

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Challenges in the Public Sector - Federal

- "Ownership" of the process
  - Agencies often want to "own" the assessment simulations
    - Customized (not off-the-shelf)
    - High fidelity, face valid and content valid simulations
    - Stakeholders, leaders want to be involved in development/evaluation

- Target competencies
  - Agencies often want to measure a fairly large number of competencies/KSAs
  - Some are difficult to measure

- Issues to consider
  - Purpose of the assessment center
  - General managerial job vs. specific job
  - Applicants from one agency or open to other agencies/departments

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Best Practices

Examples of Large-Scale Federal Assessment Centers for Decision Making

- **Promotion**
  - Field grade 14 and 15 in a Federal law enforcement agency
  - Based on extensive job analysis
  - Includes 4 simulations or 3 simulations and a structured interview
- **Selection into Career Development Programs**
  - Senior Executive Service programs
  - Based on competency model and organizational priorities
  - 4 simulations (full day)
  - Quantitative and qualitative feedback at competency level
    - Challenge = providing (limited) diagnostic feedback while preserving test security

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Development Of Simulations

Strict Content-Oriented Development Strategy

- **Specific jobs/positions**
    - Detailed job analysis data
    - Task-KSA linkages
    - Identify critical tasks that are also:
        - Measurable in a short amount of time
        - Linked to many critical KSAs
- **General managerial/executive programs**
    - Create fictitious organization with similar function as agency offering the career development program (e.g., Federal service organization)
    - Identify target competencies important to the organization/level
    - Identify measurable aspects of target competencies
    - Minimize overlap among similar competencies
    - Develop simulations of the selected tasks using types of materials they would see on the job (e.g., case files, budget report)

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Administration

- Innovative scheduling process
  - 1:1 candidate assessor ratio
    - 20 candidates/day = 20 assessors/day
  - 2 assessors per candidate for a given exercise
  - 2 schedules of candidates per day (staggered to maximize efficiency)
  - Up to 8 assessors observe a given candidate in a day
  - Assessor pairs rotate each day
  - Mix assessor pairs by important characteristics
    - Gender
    - Assessor type/location (e.g., HQ vs. Field, current employee vs. hired assessor – e.g., recent retiree)
  - Activities timed to the minute
  - Efficiently obtain brief qualitative feedback (when applicable)

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Administration

- Used job incumbents as assessors instead of professional assessors
  - More cost effective in large-scale administrations
  - Ratings consistent with professional raters
  - They have critical job knowledge

- Assess rater familiarity and partiality in advance
  - When using internal assessors
  - Collect maiden names and nicknames when possible
  - Assign assessor pairs to candidates based on these ratings
  - The "lead" assessor (e.g., "role player") has the lowest familiarity/partiality ratings

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Familiarity and Partiality

Familiarity
5 = I have supervised/worked with this applicant for at least 6 months and/or have known this applicant for a long time.
4 = I have supervised/worked with this applicant for less than 6 months and/or know this applicant fairly well.
3 = I know this applicant somewhat, but I have not supervised or worked with him/her.
2 = I do not know this applicant but know of him/her.
1 = I do not know this applicant at all.

Objectivity (Impartiality)
3 = I should not evaluate this applicant because I would not be objective or it would be perceived that I lack objectivity.
2 = I may have some problems in evaluating this applicant because I may not be objective or I may be perceived as lacking objectivity.
1 = I can objectively evaluate this applicant.

Integrating Observations and Ratings: Modified Statistical Technique

Assessors observe, record, categorize behaviors

Provide initial (independent) dimension ratings within-exercise after each exercise

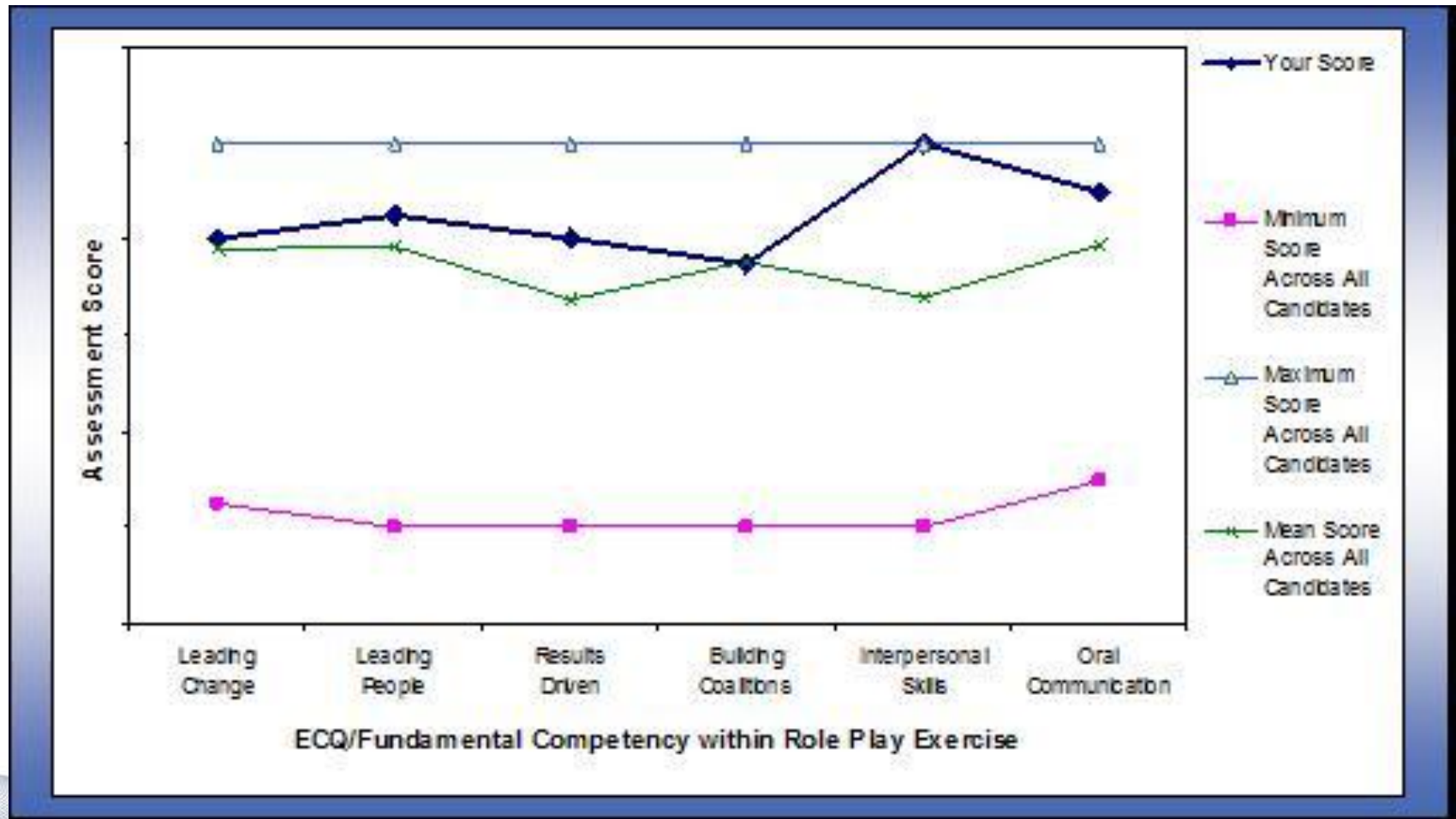Ratings within 1 point on a 5-point scale are final

Assessors discuss ratings more than 1 point apart to reach "consensus" within one point

Average final dimension ratings within and across exercises

Sum to an overall score

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New Directions in Candidate Feedback

- Agencies request normative feedback at competency level by exercise
- Basic diagnostic feedback (strengths, weaknesses) requested in assessment centers for succession planning

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- Need to run administration like a "tight ship;" even a 2-minute delay could temporarily throw off timing

- Well-trained internal managers and executives are a "win-win" as assessors
  - Make consistent ratings as professionals (saves costs)
  - They take it seriously, tolerate the long days, and like being part of the process
  - Able to serve as both role players and assessors simultaneously

- Difficult to provide meaningful qualitative feedback without compromising test security
  - Brief feedback 1-2 sentences per competency per exercise; summarize across exercises
  - Delay delivery of feedback to candidates until after decision making
  - Nevertheless, is well-received by leadership and candidates
  - May not be desirable when decision making is the main focus

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Lessons Learned

- Organizational advantages *(feedback from assessors)*
  - Process helps internal assessors with subsequent performance evaluations of subordinates (e.g., focus on observable behaviors)
  - Identify consistent strengths and weaknesses across candidates
    - Can inform gaps at individual or group level for training, rotational assignments
  - Provides a bigger picture for how to groom future leaders

- Can develop very rich exercises to measure multiple competencies subsumed under a manageable number (e.g., 5-7) of core competencies

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Future Directions and Innovative Methods

Future Directions and Innovative Methods

- Web-based methods for administration, scoring, feedback
- Technology-mediated simulations
  - Methods that select from pre-determined alternatives do not meet "assessment center" criteria

Pros	Cons
Less time commitment from assessors	Technology costs to program and animate customized simulation
Increased realism for some tasks (e.g., email)	Decreased realism of complex interactions (e.g., non-verbal behavior, inflection)
Novel	Insufficient validity evidence

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Technology-Mediated Simulation Demo (Simulated Role Play)

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