

Our first task in any audit is to look and learn. We watched assessment centres in progress, studied the materials, talked to the assessors and also interviewed candidates who had completed the process. Obviously the recruitment team already knew something was wrong: people were coming through the centre who clearly weren't a good fit for the role or the business. Even so, they were shocked by the strength of candidate feedback...

When we sat in on the wash-up sessions at the end of the day, it was clear that assessors were abandoning the competency framework because it wasn't distinguishing between candidates effectively. They were making decisions on subjective impressions and peripheral detail – and they were finding it difficult to achieve a consensus. We made a number of practical recommendations for process improvements, and went on to implement them. We itemise them here in detail because they illustrate some fundamental principles (and common faults) that apply to assessment centres.

“It was just too easy.”

A global bank asked **work** to audit the selection process for an elite international graduate entry scheme.

## Brand new

The original assessment event was simply not special enough. We needed high-calibre individuals to feel that this was an opportunity of a lifetime. The bank had invested a six-figure sum in a high-profile attraction campaign, but the assessment events were a big anticlimax with characterless settings and anonymous, impersonal content. We provided branded materials that were in line with the employer brand, promoting a strong sense of prestige and quality.

## Reality check

We designed new assessment exercises that simulated the real-world challenges facing an international manager. We set the action at the heart of a global telecoms company that had many features in common with the bank's own business context: fast-moving; international; focused on exceptional customer service. We gave candidates a number of contrasting tasks during the day and – crucially – they were responsible for managing their own time. Fact-finds and role-plays were interspersed with meetings and unexpected crises, testing self-sufficiency, decision-making under pressure and big-picture thinking.

## Global validity

We chose vocabulary that could be translated easily from one country to another – and business contexts that would be relevant to all cultures. This meant the bank could run a fair and consistent assessment process across Europe, the US and AsiaPacific region. This was operationally significant because the aim of the International Manager stream was to produce a cadre of versatile managers who could operate effectively anywhere in the world. A strategic commitment to global consistency was now supported by best-practice recruitment processes.

“ It was alright, but it didn't seem to have much to do with the job I thought I was applying for. ”

“ It didn't feel special. I've done a number of other assessment centres for ordinary graduate programmes that were more challenging than this. ”

“ It was too easy – especially for a so-called 'elite international role' ”

## The morals

- Assessment events will contribute to – or detract from – your employer brand. Make them special.
- Candidates should leave your assessment centre even more eager to join you than they were before.
- You need to be clear about what makes a good candidate and how you will measure it. Then stick to it.
- If your exercises aren't showing you the best candidates, it's the exercises that are at fault.
- If the candidate learns more about the role from an exercise, it's a good exercise.
- If everyone passes the test, it's not a test.

## Impact assessment

The post-campaign review showed that assessors were finding it much easier to identify high-potential candidates. In our online follow-ups, candidates said they found the process searching and rigorous; it was hard work but most people felt they had a genuine opportunity to show what they could do. In the vast majority of cases – and irrespective of ultimate outcome – the assessment centre increased people's interest in the role. Finally, the statistics were telling the right kind of story too, with the performance distribution following a classic bell curve; this indicates both validity and sensitivity. Or in plain-speak, it's working.

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