ASSESSMENT CENTERS:
UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS

Assessment centers have been growing in popularity over the last several years. Not only are they being used in private industries, but educational and government organizations are taking advantage of the benefits assessment centers have to offer as well. Even with the increased prevalence of assessment centers, many people still have several questions and/or concerns regarding the implementation and use of assessment centers.

Most often people are unclear about what components make up an assessment center; how to decide what competencies to measure; and how many simulations are necessary to provide a clear understanding of the competencies being measured. This article will try to answer some of the more basic questions surrounding assessment centers. However, there are several resources available that provide a more comprehensive description of assessment centers. These resources are listed at the end of this article.

When beginning to examine assessment centers, it is important to have a clear understanding of the basics. Assessment centers have been defined as:

“An assessment center consists of a standardized evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs. Several trained observers and techniques are used. Judgments about behavior are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations.”

(Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations)

It is also important to understand that there are several assessment situations that are not considered an assessment center. For example, using only computerized in-baskets or paper-and-pencil exams would not constitute an assessment center as defined above. If an incumbent is only able to select from a selection of pre-determined answers, the assessors will not be able to evaluate any overt behavior. While a pencil-and-paper exam could be used as part of a multitude of assessments, an assessment center requires the observation of overt behavior for at least one of the assessments used in the assessment center.
Now, with the basic idea of an assessment center, it is important to accurately examine the various elements that form the framework of an assessment center. In order for an assessment center to be useful, it must assess a set of competencies, a group of observable behaviors related to the job that are important to job success. A job analysis should be completed to identify the competencies needed for job success.

After the important competencies have been determined, the assessments used to measure these competencies are selected. Assessments may include tests, questionnaires, interviews, and simulations (e.g., role-plays, in-baskets) (DDI, 2000). Assessment centers must utilize more than one assessment, even if the one assessment is able to provide observable behavior. Different assessments should be used to induce a range of behaviors associated with the selected competencies. For example, an in-basket exercise may better assess organizational skills than a multiple-choice exam.

Assessment centers also require trained assessors, individuals observing and evaluating the assessment center. Assessors must have an understanding of the competencies being measured; they must know how to recognize what constitutes expected behavior for each different assessment; and they must accurately document, observe, and record behavior in order to provide feedback. Assessor proficiency in rating needs to be addressed before, during, and after evaluation. There are multiple ways to address assessor proficiency including: reviewing the accuracy of rating performance, requiring a review of assessor reports after the evaluation, observing the assessor during the evaluation, and requiring refresher training for all assessors (DDI, 2000).

As previously stated, assessors must be attentive in recording the behaviors they observe. There should be a systematic process of recording and combining evaluations that all assessors follow. Since the assessors may be required to provide feedback or prepare a report regarding their ratings, it is essential that the results are documented as clearly and as accurately as possible.
This article provided a short synopsis of the elements of an assessment center. There are several resources available to you that provide more in-depth information on assessor training, validation, and the rights of participants:

