



Development Centre for  
Managerial Competences

# *Assessment center quality*

M a n u a l



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



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# Definition of an Assessment Center

An assessment center (AC) is a procedure aiming to assess the current state of competences of participants as well as the (hidden) potential of a participant. Methods used in an assessment center procedure all use standardized evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs.

Several trained observers and techniques are used in the process. Methods that can be used in the procedure range from in-tray exercises to oral presentations, group assignments and role plays, naming just those, that are most frequently used. The questionnaires of various types (e.g. psychological testing, various self-assessment questionnaires for competences ... ) can be a part of an assessment center, as can be an interview, but do not constitute an assessment center, even if various questionnaires are used or multiple raters are engaged (e.g. 360° assessment).

**In-tray exercise** is a written exercise, where the participant has to work through a pile of correspondence in their in-tray.

**Oral presentation** is where the participant has to present a point in front of an audience.

**Group assignments** involve participants working with other candidates as part of a team to resolve a presented issue.

**Individual role play** is a test of how a participant responds when put on the spot.

Trained observers use standardized check-lists to note their observations. After a participant finishes with the assessment methods, a meeting amongst the observers or rather assessors takes place, where comprehensive accounts of behavior, and often ratings of it, are pooled. The discussion results in evaluations of the performance of the participants on the dimensions/competences or other variables that the assessment center is designed to measure.

## The main criteria of what is an assessment center are:

- ♦ A systematic method (i.e. it is known in advance in detail what we are assessing)
- ♦ Various types of assessment methods are used
- ♦ One of the types is necessarily a simulation (e.g. a role play)
- ♦ The results of the assessments are integrated in the end
- ♦ The focus is on key attributes, competences, skills etc. for a position



There is a difference between an assessment center and assessment center methodology.

While a simulation or a role-play can often be a part of a selection procedure or even an assessment of competences procedure, it is still only an assessment center method and not the assessment center per se, if it does not meet all criteria for it. For the criteria to be fulfilled, there have to be multiple simulations, they have to be systematically structured etc. In this document we refer strictly to the assessment center itself and not to methods that can be a part of it.

# Pros and cons of the assessment center

It is important to know the advantages, but also the limitations of the assessment center to ensure its best use.

Assessment center has **numerous advantages:**

- ♦ Has proven predictive validity
- ♦ Predicts a wide range of criteria
- ♦ Can measure many attributes that are otherwise very difficult to measure
- ♦ Can measure developable attributes (competences)
- ♦ Allows for the measurement of multiple attributes
- ♦ Can incorporate anything that can be measured
- ♦ Realism: the exercises are hard to fake
- ♦ Can assess both declarative and procedural knowledge
- ♦ Can be (should be) tailored to meet the specific needs of an organization
- ♦ The scores show little adverse impact
- ♦ Highly accepted by employees and candidates
- ♦ Less restrictions of range at high levels of management than e.g. cognitive tests
- ♦ Reports are rich with behavioral detail
- ♦ Various advances decrease the disadvantages in assessor load (e.g. scoring and reporting advances) and costs and manageability (e.g. technological advances)

**Disadvantages** of the assessment center are:

- ♦ It is not entirely clear yet how various dimensions and various situations (tasks) interact or in other words, what triggers in the situations (simulations) influence a specific response in a candidate – that is why the best quality of scores is ensured by closely linking the simulations to realistic work situations
- ♦ Requires a lot of staff
- ♦ Requires a lot of time
- ♦ Expensive
- ♦ May not be cost effective for initial screening for low-level jobs
- ♦ Difficult to manage (complex)
- ♦ Brings a big cognitive load on assessors
- ♦ Only a limited number of people can be processed at a time
- ♦ Cross cultural adaptations can be difficult to design and standardize

Some of the disadvantages are already being addressed through different approaches and advances. The provider should strive to decrease the disadvantages where possible, without harming the quality of the assessment center outcomes.

## Roles and tasks

There are three main roles in every AC procedure:

**The candidate:** Is the person who will be assessed and will get to know about their strengths and weaknesses as well as some information about possibilities on how to improve themselves.

**Role player:** Role players are those who interact with participants to generate behaviour to be assessed. This is often done on a one-to-one basis, with assessors present. Role players are trained to understand the overall process in general terms and their part in it in helping to elicit behaviour. They must be familiar with the particular material of the exercise and the role in which they operate.

They also need to be trained in how far to adhere to the prepared "script" and where they are expected to use discretion, for example in following through a novel line of discussion raised by a participant. Their training should include a process of checking for consistency of standards. This should be subject to periodic review to ensure that these standards are maintained. Where debriefing of role players is to be used to generate supplementary evidence e.g. on their version of what had been agreed, they are to be trained so as to confine themselves to delivering the information requested rather than making generally discursive comments about a participant.

**The assessor:** The main aims of assessors are twofold – to observe and to evaluate. Observation takes place during simulations and evaluations along with judgments take place after. An observation is linked to behavior only and is defined as a perception that can be objectively observed (ie. seen, smelled, heard or touched). Judgments are interpretations based on the assessor's observations.

## An example – a general overview for one-day assessment

In an one-day assessment, it is generally feasible to administer four exercises for up to twelve candidates. However, note that what a one-day assessment looks like is dependent on many variables, most notably the exercises/simulations used.

### **The following represents only one possibility of a one-day Assessment Center:**

- ♦ In-Tray - The in-tray is typically allocated about 90 minutes to complete.
- ♦ Oral Presentation - The oral presentation requires preparation time of 15-30 minutes, plus a fifteen (15) minute block of time in making the presentation and responding to assessor questions.
- ♦ Leaderless Group Discussion - The leaderless group discussion should take approximately 30-50 minutes; preparation is about 10 minutes and the discussion itself should last from 15 to 40 minutes, depending on the task of the group.
- ♦ Structured Interview - The structured interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes.
- ♦ Role play – Role plays usually require a preparation time of 15 minutes and allow 15 minutes for completion.

# Essential Elements/Steps of the AC Process

## Step 1: Job Analysis and Behavioral Classification

It does not matter how simple or complicated a specific job is, the first step in the assessment center process is always the job analysis – identification of what dimensions, competences, attributes and job performance indices are important to job success and should therefore be evaluated by the assessment center. The extent of the job analysis is, however, affected by the purpose and intent of the assessment. It may be done through competency-modeling procedures or by other means, but it must result in clearly specified categories of behavior that can be observed in assessment procedures and be related to success in the target job or position.

On the other hand, behaviors displayed by participants must be classified into relevant categories (attributes, characteristics, aptitudes, knowledge, competences ...) that are used for the check-lists.

## Step 2: Assessment Techniques

The next step is connecting the desired behaviors and competences on paper with practical exercises and assessment techniques. Methods have to be carefully designed to ensure that the selected categories of behavior can be expressed.

## Step 3: Multiple Assessments

More than one assessment technique must be used to assure validity of results. Options include simulations, tests, interviews, questionnaires, sociometric tools and 360° method.

All assessment techniques are to be pretested to ensure reliable, objective and relevant behavioral information.

## Step 4: Simulations

When we are talking about simulations we mean group assignments, in-tray exercises, role plays, interviews, presentations, fact-finding exercises and others. There should be at least one but usually there are several simulations included in the AC. A sufficient number of job-related simulations must be included to allow opportunities for the candidate to show the behavior that is being observed.

When developing a new simulation exercise take care not to favor any personal trait without reason (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) and make sure that the simulation exercise includes enough stimuli to elicit the assessed behavior. Also, you have to be aware that assessment center materials often are intellectual property protected by international copyright laws.

## Step 5: Recording behavior

There needs to be a clear and systematic way established for assessors to record their behavioral observations. Options include handwritten notes, behavioral observation scales or behavioral checklists (or a combination – e.g. checklists plus notes). Also audio and/or video recordings can be made (with the approval of everybody involved). Notes and checklists prove to be useful in case of more than one assessors, who will sit down for a meeting very soon after observing an assessee. Audio/video material is most useful when there is only

one assessor available or there is some time between the simulation and observers meeting, as it serves as a reminder as well as a completely objective observer.

**Step 6: Organizational policy statement**

Prior to implementing AC in the company an organizational policy statement is to be prepared and agreed upon by both – the company and the contractor. (see more on page 7)

**Step 7: Assessors**

Multiple assessors must be used to observe and evaluate each assessee in order to ensure maximum objectivity. The optimum number depends on several variables (type of exercises, assessor experience, purpose of AC). The most common ratio is 2 assessors per assessee.

The role of an assessor can also be assumed by employees of the assessee's company under the condition that they are not their direct superiors (when used for selection or promotional purposes) and have undergone assessors training. All assessors have to go through training.

**Step 8: Assessor training**

All assessors need to be qualified and trained to be assessors prior to participating in AC procedures. (more on that on pages 9 and 10)

**Step 9: Data integration and Reports**

Assessors must prepare a short report of their observations immediately after a simulation (gather their thoughts and note some possible evaluations). These reports are for internal use only.

At the integration discussion assessors report their observations for each dimension. Integration of information should always be done by consensus and not by simply taking an average score. This might imply lengthy discussions among assessors, so the needed time should be available.

The integration should take into account both, the observed dimensions (e.g. competences) and specific tasks. The research shows that both explain an approximately equal share of the variance. Only integrating results over dimensions is thus not justified (as significant differences in the behavior of the same person occur over different simulations).

After the integration discussion when evaluations are done, assessors put together a report for each participant, containing results by competences with examples and, if possible, charts. This report is to be handed in one copy to the participant and in one copy to the HR department, if not agreed otherwise.

**Step 10: Feedback**

Feedback should be given to each participant, regardless of the aim of the assessment center. However, in the recruitment situation this feedback can be shorter compared to when the assessment center is performed for diagnostic or development purposes. When the aim of the AC is the development of competences itself, the feedback should be timely (ideally after each exercise) and detailed.

# General terms and conditions for the use of the assessment center (Organizational Policy Statement)

Prior to implementing AC in the company an organizational policy statement is to be prepared and agreed upon by both – the company and the contractor. In this document the following should be specified:

1. **Objective(s) of the AC** (selection procedure, development, evaluation of potential, etc.). It is necessary that all parties involved (including participants) are aware of the objectives.
2. Qualifications of Consultants and AC developers. Who will facilitate the procedure and what qualifications they have.
3. **Assesseees**. Who will be included in the procedure along with a protocol of informing participants of participation (see more on that on the next page).
4. **Rights of the assesseees**. Assesseees should receive feedback on their assessment center performance and should be informed of any recommendations made. Assesseees who are members of the organization have a right to read any formal summary written reports concerning their own performance and recommendations that are prepared and made available to management. Applicants to an organization should be provided with, at a minimum, what the final recommendation is and, if possible and if requested by the applicant, the reason for the recommendation.
5. **Assessors**. Who the assessors will be (contractors or the ones from within the organization, either the client or the contractor) and the training protocol.
6. **Use of data**. A clear protocol has to be written down on which data is accessible to whom and under which circumstances (recording behaviors, feedback information, etc.). The organization should inform the assessee what records and data are being collected, maintained, used, and disseminated. If the organization decides to use assessment results for purposes other than those originally announced and that can impact the assessee, the assessee must be informed and consent obtained.
7. **Copyrights**. AC exercises/simulations are usually exempted from disclosure, since they are copyrighted. The rationale and validity data concerning ratings of dimensions and the resulting recommendations should be made available upon request of the individual.

## Informed Participation

The organization is obligated to make an announcement prior to assessment so that participants are fully informed about the program. It is highly recommended that the following basic information should be given to all prospective participants in order to avoid confusion or fear:

1. **Objective(s):** The objective(s) of the program and the purpose of the assessment center. The organization may choose to disclose the dimensions measured and the general nature of the exercises prior to the assessment.
2. **Selection:** How individuals are selected to participate in the center.
3. **Choice(s):** Any options the individual has regarding the choice of participating in the assessment center as a condition of employment, advancement, development, etc.
4. **Staff:** General information on the assessor staff, including composition and assessor training.
5. **Materials:** What assessment center materials completed by the individual are collected and maintained by the organization.
6. **Results:** How the assessment center results will be used and how long the assessment results will be maintained on file.
7. **Feedback:** When and what kind of feedback will be given to the participants and by whom.
8. **Reassessment:** The procedure for reassessment (if any).
9. **Access:** Who will have access to the assessment center reports and under what conditions.
10. **Contact:** Who will be the contact person for any questions on this topic.

## Assessor Training

Assessor training is an integral part of the assessment center program. The objective is to obtain reliable and accurate assessor judgments. The quality of assessors is a crucial factor for the quality of the ratings. Assessors must be trained and monitored, since even with proper training the cognitive load for assessors is significant. In order to reach minimum requirements, the following must be achieved:

### Length

The length of assessor training may vary due to a variety of considerations, though it should be noted, that length and quality of training are not synonymous. Precise guidelines for the minimum number of hours or days required for assessor training are difficult to specify, although at least one day training is recommended for people who have no previous experience with assessment center.

## Procedure

The training must consist first of an introduction to the AC in order to reach a common understanding. Next the role of an assessor in the AC is explained. Assessors must be informed on assessment policies and restrictions on how data are to be used. Usually there is a form drawn up that every would-be assessor has to sign.

After that the assessors must familiarize themselves with all materials that will be used in the AC procedure - foremost with the checklists. Next they need to obtain thorough knowledge of the assessment techniques and relevant dimensions to be observed in every simulation. After that they also need an in-depth understanding of evaluation and rating procedures including how data are integrated. Demonstrations of simulations are advisable.

A necessary part of training is to familiarize the assessors with possible errors of observation: first impression, stereotypes ("logical" mistakes), tendency (towards the middle, strictness, extremes ...), similarity, "halo" and "horns" effect, primary and recency effect, bias (because of hierarchy, attractiveness, closeness ...).

## Feedback giving

It is advisable for the assessors to be also responsible for giving feedback. This contributes to their awareness of the importance of the task and continuous effort to avoid any observation errors.

In this case, also the training should include the techniques and ways of giving good, constructive feedback, how to respond to the reactions of the assessee etc.

## Tools used for training the assessor

- ◆ Document detailing assessment policies & data collection and confidentiality agreement
- ◆ Job descriptions, competence profiles (for the target positions candidates are assessed for), organizational key competences ...
- ◆ Participant instructions for all simulations along with corresponding checklists
- ◆ Assessment center simulations
- ◆ Examples of short reports on observations
- ◆ Examples of final reports
- ◆ Role play on giving feedback

## Training goals

- a. Thorough knowledge of the organization and job/job family or normative group being assessed to provide an effective context for assessor judgments.
- b. Thorough knowledge and understanding of the assessment dimensions, definitions of dimensions, relationship to job performance, and examples of effective and ineffective performance.
- c. Thorough knowledge and understanding of the assessment techniques, relevant dimensions to be observed in each portion of the assessment center, expected or typical behavior, examples or samples of actual behaviors, etc.
- d. Demonstrated ability to observe, record, and classify behavior in dimensions,

including knowledge of forms used by the center.

- e. Thorough knowledge and understanding of evaluation and rating procedures, including how data are integrated.
- f. Thorough knowledge and understanding of assessment policies and practices of the organization, including restrictions on how assessment data are to be used, when this is a requirement of assessors.
- g. Thorough knowledge and understanding of feedback procedures, where appropriate.
- h. Demonstrated ability to give accurate oral and written feedback, when feedback is given by the assessors.

### **Testing the aptitude of assessors and retaining quality**

Each would-be assessor has to participate in at least 2 assessments as the third assessor successfully, before being able to participate as an individual assessor.

If failed:

1. revise some parts of the training and do another trial.
2. repeat the training and do another trial.

There is a maximum of three trials – if still not successful the person is not competent to be an assessor.

In order to retain quality in assessing, assessors need to attend a refreshment course if there is a 6 or more months' pause between AC's.

### **Variances on procedure**

Same company assessors: need not be put through the whole of the training. Experienced assessors should decide the degree of training a same company assessor should go through on individual basis. The minimum is for them to sit through a demonstration of simulations they will help assess. In this case it is recommended that they are the third assessor (along the two trained ones).

# Continuous improvement

## Following the developments

The assessment center procedures are to be continuously updated in order to achieve one of the following goals:

- ♦ Better quality of the assessments
- ♦ Better accessibility for the users

The current trends are:

- ♦ Shorter, focused simulations are used (instead of classical long tasks)
- ♦ Observations at the workplace, when they can be structured and assessed in a way that ensures quality results, can replace the 'artificial' assessment center procedures
- ♦ IT can be used for distance assessments

## Following the research

The assessment center is an approach that is not thoroughly researched yet. New valuable insights can be made through research regarding different aspects of design and implementation that are crucial for providers.

The person responsible for the assessment center service should thus follow the development and research in this area and continually implement changes that provide better quality of the outcomes.

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