

Workshop

Guidelines in the Designing & Developing of Simulation Exercises for Assessment Centres

Presenters

Anne Buckett, Precision HR

Rian Viviers, UNISA

Outline of Programme

- Module 1 – Setting the scene (a theoretical overview)
- Module 2 – Practical advice & establishing guidelines
- Module 3 – Case study & delegate practical design session
- Module 4 – Evaluation, wrap up & conclusion

Module 1

A Theoretical Overview

1. What is an Assessment Centre?
2. Job Analysis
3. Competency Profile
4. Assessment Matrix
5. Determining the instruments

1. What is an Assessment Centre ?

- An AC is a process in which aspects of a job are simulated so that participant's behaviour can be observed, recorded, classified and evaluated by assessors
- The theory behind this is that if one wishes to predict future job performance then the best way of doing is to get the individual to carry out a set of tasks which accurately sample those required in the job and are as similar to them as possible

2. Job analysis

- The route to competencies
- An analysis of relevant behaviours must be conducted into dimensions, competencies, attributes and job performance indices important to identify what should be evaluated
- Two key drivers:
 - Capture the different situational contexts of the job
 - Provide appropriate vehicles for accurate assessment of the range of skills and competencies required to perform the job

Job analysis...cont

- Representativeness of the behaviour samples obtained relative to the target job
- Methodology for clustering the competencies (a judgmental or a statistical approach)
- Methodology for checking definitions of the competencies
- Methodology for ranking competencies by importance or grouping them in some way

Job analysis...cont

Exercises must reflect the job

- Important to develop a content-valid AC
- Must represent the types, complexities and difficult level of activities required in the job
- Job analysis must identify frequency of job activities

3. Competency Profile

- Outcome of job analysis reflected in competency profile
- Can be generic or more tailor-made
- Should not exceed maximum of 8 competencies
- Used as basis for numerous personnel decisions

4. Assessment Matrix

- Overview of competencies measured in different exercises
- Serves as useful summary table of ratings
- At a glance info on candidate

5. Determining the instruments AC Exercises/Techniques

- Simulations are a type of situational test
- AC exercises are developed to carefully represent the most important elements of the target job
- This contribute to job relatedness and predictive power
- Assessment techniques must include a sufficient number of job-related simulations to allow opportunities to observe behaviour related to each competency
- A simulation is an exercise technique designed to elicit behaviours related to dimensions of performance, requiring participants to respond behaviourally to situational stimuli

AC Exercises/Techniques...cont

- Bespoke exercise design ensures practicality and validity
- The final choice depends on the organisation & its needs
- Level of fidelity (resemblance) – depends on purpose
 - Training more
 - Selection less
- Separate vs. integrated – depends various factors
 - Separate: selection – test various scenarios
 - Integrated: development - improvement in own area

Types of simulations

- Samples of behaviour (Typical performance)
 - Role-plays (subordinate counselling session)
 - Written projects/Case studies (analysis presentation & report writing)
 - In-baskets
 - Fact-finding and decision-making exercises
 - Leaderless group (meeting management)
 - Oral presentation
 - Situational judgment exercises
 - Video assessments

Other instruments to consider:

- Signs of behaviour (maximum performance)
 - Psychometric testing: aptitude tests, personality questionnaires, interest inventories, motivation questionnaires
 - Interviews: competency-based interviews

Simulation design

- Literature investigating the process of tailoring a competency-based assessment centre to assess learning outcomes is sparse

- However, one book to consider:

Developing Organizational Simulations

by Thornton and Mueller-Hanson (2004)

Steps in developing a simulation exercise (Thornton & Mueller-Hanson)

- Phase 1: Situation analysis
- Phase 2: Specifications for dimensions and simulation
- Phase 3: Exercise construction
- Phase 4: Pilot testing and formative evaluation
- Phase 5: Application
- Phase 6: Summative evaluation

Steps to follow in designing a simulation exercise

- Define the need and objectives (e.g. selection/development) including intended target population
- Decide on the competencies to be measured
- Define the context and situation (scenario) parameters
- Determine who will design (outline any specialists/functional knowledge required)

Steps to follow in designing a simulation exercise...cont

- Specify and contact relevant trialling groups
- Define difficult level and format
- Outline content, including:
 - Role/tasks
 - Background info (e.g. organisation)
 - Problem scenario
 - Communications/output etc required from candidates
- Prepare draft exercise
 - Collect material and info
 - Collate, translate into documents (e.g. memos)
 - Incorporate “critical incidents”

Steps to follow in designing a simulation exercise...cont

- Review (informally) with appropriate others. Gain feedback on amendments necessary
- Design scoring/assessing guidelines
- Design assessors manual
- Trial scoring/assessing guidelines. Gain feedback on amendments necessary
- Trial exercise using scoring guidelines. Gather data for norms, reliability (of performance and assessing consistency) and validity

Steps to follow in designing a simulation exercise...cont

- Prepare briefing and administration documents for assessors
- Sign off
- Monitor, review and update with use, gain feedback and amend where necessary. Also, gather further norm data and carry out predictive validity study

Sources of evidence in designing case studies

- Documents
 - letters, memoranda, agendas, reports, administrative documents, questionnaires, newspaper articles, any document that is germane to the investigation
- Archival records
 - service records, organisational records, lists of names, survey data
- Interviews
 - several forms of interviews: open-ended, focussed, structured or survey

Sources of evidence in designing case studies...cont

- Direct observation
 - Field visits: casual data collection, formal protocols to measure and record behaviours
- Participant observation/Monitoring visits
 - Researcher becomes an active participant e.g. in study of groups
- Physical artefacts
 - Physical evidence e.g. tools or instruments

Aspects to consider.....

- Screen content for inappropriate language
 - Sexist language
 - Offensive language
 - Jargon
 - Acronyms
- Monitor reading and conceptual level
- Accommodate disabilities
- Use neutral and diverse names
- Pick a neutral setting

Module 2 – Practical Advice / Establishing Guidelines

- What do the different simulation exercises look like?
- General guidelines
- Discussion of various projects
- Discussion of the process followed
- Customised / bespoke options versus off-the-shelf options
- Delegate experiences

Module 2 – What do the different simulations look like?

- In-Baskets:
 - ❑ A collection of items reflecting a managers / supervisors “in-basket” / “to do” list
 - ❑ Consist of a variety of general management activities from attending meetings or industry forums to staffing and budgeting issues.
 - ❑ Items may be interrelated to increase difficulty

Module 2 – What do the different simulations look like?

- Role-Plays:
 - ❑ Usually a scenario covering a particular issue(s)
 - ❑ Interaction with 1 role-player
 - ❑ Detailed instructions for both participant and role-player
 - ❑ Participant does not usually have all the information at hand and must uncover the information as the discussion progresses
 - ❑ Participants encouraged to act naturally to ensure accurate & relevant interpretation & feedback

Module 2 – What do the different simulations look like?

- Group Discussions:
 - ❑ Usually consists of 4 – 6 participants
 - ❑ Scenario is typically one where differing opinions will be evident
 - ❑ Unassigned group – participants have no particular roles to play and the interaction may well show certain styles emerging
 - ❑ Assigned group – participants have clear instructions on the particular role to play (e.g. time-keeper, leader, “trouble-maker” etc. and must play their character during the interaction)

Module 2 – What do the different simulations look like?

- Other simulations:
 - ❑ Case studies
 - ❑ Fact finding exercises
 - ❑ Situational judgement exercises
 - ❑ Scheduling exercises

Module 2 – Steps in In-Basket Design

- Key steps in In-Basket design:
 - Consider the impact of language on the candidates
 - The exercise must reflect language requirements of the job
 - The level of the job indicates the response style
 - Content must relate directly to the job
 - Content must be justified on the basis of job demands
 - Typical examples: staff issues, union issues, customer complaints, budgets, attending meetings, returning phone calls, diary management, various operational tasks

Module 2 – Steps in Role-Play Design

- Key steps in Role-Play design:
- Content must reflect a situation the candidate is likely to experience in the job
- Candidate must be asked to reach some sort of conclusion
- Clear objective to achieve must be stated (otherwise discussion continues aimlessly without impetus for the emergence of different types of behaviour)
- Allocate time limit (both for preparation & the discussion - this puts the candidate under a certain degree of pressure & forces them to reach a conclusion) (usually 20 minutes prep & 20 – 30 minutes discussion)
- Don't give suggestions or advise about what to do as this prevents their own natural behaviour from emerging
- Typical scenarios for role-plays: counselling, negotiating, customer complaint

Module 2 – Steps in Group exercise design

- Key steps in Group exercise design:
- Candidate(s) must be asked to reach some sort of agreement
- State clear objective
- Set objective with a time limit (usually 15 – 30 minutes prep and about 45 minutes discussion)
- Scenario must reflect some aspect of the job but must not be too job specific
- Decide beforehand whether the exercise will be unassigned or assigned roles
- Typical scenarios for group exercises: strategy formulation, contract negotiation, tender or proposal review

Module 2 – General Guidelines

- Developing your own simulation exercise is time-consuming
- A fair amount of skill & expertise is required to design something of substance
- You must spend time on research, writing and trialling the different exercises to ensure that they are viable and applicable to the organisation
- Written exercises (e.g. in-baskets & case studies) are particularly time-consuming to develop
- One-on-one exercises can be relatively straightforward
- Generally, the more senior the job the more difficult it tends to be to design an effective exercise

Module 2 – General Guidelines

- Advantages of your own design:
- You can set exercises that are more in context for the job & thus tend to be more relevant to the participants
- Developing exercises can be a learning experience
- If the exercise is practical, you can use “real-life” issues & problems
- May increase participant motivation as they are likely to come up with some useful suggestions or insights
- Can ensure that no participant has an unfair advantage over another owing to having encountered the exercise before

Module 2 – General Guidelines

- Requirements for an effective exercise:
- Try to make the exercise as fair as possible to all participants
- Do not assume pre-existing knowledge
- It must be well constructed i.e. clear instructions with challenging but achievable objectives
- It must be practical to administer i.e. full administration instructions, full additional information (role-plays), participant review form is useful & gives insight afterwards
- It must be straightforward to assess i.e. specific & clear guidelines for assessors with detailed indicators & competencies
- It must be designed to assess a reasonable number of competencies – rule of thumb is about 3 - 5

Module 3 - Practical

- 5 groups of equal numbers
- Analyse the current job description
- Task:
 - 1. Draw up an assessment matrix
 - 2. Determine the instruments / techniques
 - 3. Design a role-play to measure your competencies
 - Remember:
 - Role-play can become ineffective if people are unclear about what they are supposed to do
 - Role-play briefs should contain enough information for both parties to engage in a believable and relevant conversation
 - Avoid giving people the task of role playing attitudes alone
 - Adequate preparation time should be provided

Module 4 – Evaluation, wrap-up & conclusion

- Discussion with other groups
- Feedback on process of design
- Final points

Learning Points

- Group discussion & debriefing

Source Documents

- Saunders, E. (2000). Assessing Human Competence: Practical Guidelines for the South African Manager. Knowledge Resources
- Oxford Psychologists Press. (1999). Assessment Centre Skills Manual.
- Jansen, P & De Jongh, F. (1997). Assessment Centres: A Practical Handbook. John Wiley & Sons.
- Thornton, G. C. (1992). Assessment Centres in Human Resource Management. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Thornton, G.C. & Mueller-Hanson, R. A. (2004). Developing organizational simulations: A guide for practitioners and students. Mahwah, NY: Erlbaum

Q & A

Thank you!