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The challenge of assessing 600 people in less than a month seems an impossible target, especially in a profession which has been criticised for lengthy projects in the past.

But, according to Pieter Moller of Absa, nothing is impossible for a project that has its logistics on track.

After Moller and his colleagues carried out an assessment of Absa's regional managers in 2006, the company decided that it needed assessments of its branch managers as well. The new demands on regional managers to be more active had led to a knock-on effect in the branches, where managers were being challenged to take full responsibility for what happened in their branches.

But were the managers suited to their new roles? To answer that and other questions, Moller was given the task of assessing branch managers in all nine provinces. Participation was voluntary, and 660 of the 700 managers agreed to take part after being assured that the assessments would not judge anyone as a failure but would rather identify areas for growth and development.

“We decided to combine situational judgement tests (SJTs) with traditional assessment procedures,” Moller explained.

SJTs simulate work situations and assess preferences for certain behaviours. Common problems or challenges are outlined and potential responses are presented in a multiple choice format. The choices are then marked on a score card and integrated into an individual report.

For this project, the SJTs made up 40% of the assessment. The other 60% was made up from interactive exercises designed to test the subjects' ability to think on their feet. This split was decided upon so that less experienced employees would not be discriminated against.

Usually this is a time-consuming process, but Moller and his team knew that to meet their target they had to assess 40 people a day and produce reports on each one of them before bedtime. Not that sleep was a priority: “We often worked from 6am to 2.30am,” he said.

This is where the logistics came in.

“One project administrator would open a session. Then at 3pm, the other would catch a plane to another centre and it would be his turn to open the day's work there the following morning. And because everything had to be recorded, it also involved DHL shipping camera stands around the country and us carrying a cumbersome bag containing 11 cameras on and off each flight.”

The video recordings were an important part of the brief to reduce grievances. All assessments were kept so they could be traced back if necessary. And this diligence paid off: no formal grievances and no CCMA hearings resulted from what turned out to be one of the biggest HR interventions ever carried out by Absa.