

*Professional Guidelines for
Global Assessment Centers*

The 2006 Extension to The Guidelines
(Draft Version)

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Professional Guidelines for Global Assessment Centers***

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History and Overview

The 2006 *Professional Guidelines for Global Assessment Centers (draft version)* emerged from ongoing discussions held between B. Byham, G. Thornton (III), and A. Chawla from 2002 to 2004 and in subsequent discussions with S. Houde, and other attendees at the 32nd International Congress on Assessment Center Methods, 2004. In light of the rapid growth of interest in applications of and guidance for assessment center usage in international settings (e.g., by multinational organizations), the idea of extending the current *Guidelines and Ethical Considerations on Assessment Center Methods* was suggested. Accordingly, the current 2006 extensions to the guidelines (*draft version*) address issues relevant to the development, use and validation of assessment centers when applied across multiple countries for the selection, promotion and development of leaders operating in an international context.

PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES FOR GLOBAL ASSESSMENT CENTERS

(The 2006 Extension to The Guidelines)

Introduction

In the past decade, labour trends have been indicative of international labour and economic migration. Organizations are asking for staffing systems that tackle their international personnel needs. When designing these systems, HR/management professionals have begun asking questions regarding how they should adapt their existing assessment center practices for international applications. Assessment center practitioners have begun searching for a common set of guiding principles. They are searching for information on professional best-practices that can help inform them about the multicultural/multi-national issues that must be deliberated upon during the design and implementation of such assessment centers. Practitioners are relying upon an international network of professionals to understand these best practices and to adopt them within their own organization. Organizations are also looking to better their personnel managements systems by importing best practices from other organizations around the globe.

The International Testing Commission, noting the trend towards internationalization of staffing, has already developed testing guidelines to address *test* usage in international settings (www.intest.org/test_adaptation.htm). In a similar vein, the assessment center *Guidelines* should inform assessment center developers and administrators about how to effectively design and/or adapt assessment centers/methods for application in multi-national/cross-cultural settings. Therefore, an extension to the existing *Guidelines and Ethical Considerations on Assessment Center Methods* has been added. The extension is to be called the “*Professional Guidelines for Global Assessment Centers*”. The purpose of the Extension is to provide systematic guidelines on issues requiring consideration when adapting or designing an assessment center for a different national or cultural context.

Key Purpose: *The current Extension to the Guidelines and Ethical Considerations on Assessment Center Methods has been designed to address issues relevant to the development, use and validation of assessment centers when applied across different countries for the selection, promotion and development of personnel. These issues apply in the following instances: (a) an assessment center will be used with personnel in different countries belonging to the same organization, (b) the assessment center method is transported from one country to an organization in another country, and (c) the assessment center method is imported from another country and implemented in an organization in a different country.*

This Extension is the first to address the international application of assessment centers and represents the latest step in the on-going efforts of the Congress to provide practitioners with best practices in the provision of their assessment center services.

Possible Applications

The following are prototypical examples of situations in which assessment centers/methods are imported or exported across countries. In these situations, practitioners would be required to consider the many issues described in the Extension. Note that the examples depicted here are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of situations in which these guidelines will apply.

- *The Multinational Organization Model* - Adapting an existing assessment center to another branch of the organization in another country/region (e.g., an international automaker uses its Japanese assessment center model as a foundation to design a new assessment center in North America).
- *The International Consultant Model* - An existing assessment center/method is transported from one country to an organization in another country (e.g., an UK-based consultant uses a successful assessment center method, typical to Britain and its British clients, as the foundation for designing an assessment center for a new client in Malaysia).

- *The Local Importation Model:* Successful assessment centers/methods are imported from one country and implemented in an organization in a different country (e.g., a South African mining organization wants to use an assessment center similar to those found to be highly successful when used by the mining industry in North America).

In light of the complexities of cross-cultural differences, practitioners using assessment center/methods beyond the boundaries of the country/region from which it originated must consider the issues described in the Extension during all stages of the assessment center process. A process of inquiry must be followed to determine the extent of cultural accommodation necessary even if the end result of such an exercise results in minimal cross-cultural modifications. Documentation of such a process of inquiry will help provide defensible evidence that the validity and applicability of the assessment center has not been compromised at either the design or implementation phase.

Core Assumptions

The Extension to the *Guidelines* has been founded on the following core assumptions. Understanding and recognizing international cultural differences (i.e., differences in cultural beliefs and practices) will:

1. Enhance the validity of personnel/leadership assessments.
2. Enhance the ethical conduct of assessment center practitioners.
3. Promote employment equity.

These assumptions are in keeping with other cross-cultural assessment guidelines (e.g., The American Psychological Association's Guidelines for Multi-cultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists; APA, 2002). These guidelines provide a conceptual framework for adapting assessment center practices for international contexts.

The Guidelines

While it is understood that the extension to the *Guidelines* may need to be adapted for use by individual assessment center developers and administrators, adherence to them should assist practitioners in:

1. Ensuring that their clients' international and local assessment goals are met.
2. Demonstrating commitment to good international assessment practice.
3. Ensuring evaluations are based on culturally-informed, comprehensive, and relevant information.
4. Ensuring that only qualified, culturally knowledgeable staffs conduct assessments.

A. Macro-Level Considerations - Contextual Factors

When developing assessment centers for a multinational or cross-cultural application, the assumption cannot be made that the purpose, design and content of a pre-existing assessment center/method is transferable across cultures/countries. To ensure the validity of the assessment center/methods for all cultures involved, a determination will have to be made as to whether an assessment center/method, developed for one culture, can be applied to another culture. A range of contextual factors will help determine whether the assessment center/methods can be adopted uniformly, with minimal changes, or whether the assessment center will need to be customized (to varying extents), to suit the needs of the new country. The following contextual issues should guide this determination:

1. Extent of commonality in the cultural, business and socio-political environments between countries (e.g., cultural beliefs and behaviours, local business laws). *(Relevant for all prototypical models)*
2. Differences in national guidelines set by local professional associations (e.g., American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines in U.S.A. vs. British Psychological Association's professional guidelines in U.K.). *(Relevant for all prototypical models)*
3. Commonality of skills/dimensions critical for job success. *(Relevant for all prototypical models)*

4. Commonality in performance standards/behaviours required for job success.
(Relevant for all prototypical models)
5. Extent of commonality of the business models between the organizations across which the assessment center/method is being adapted (i.e., overall business strategy, vision, values, and practices). *(Particularly relevant for the International Consultant Model, and the Multinational Model)*
6. Degree of centralized vs. decentralized (i.e., local) control between branches of the organization. *(Particularly relevant for the Multinational Organization Model)*
7. Whether comparison statistics are required across locations. *(Particularly relevant for the Multinational Organization Model)*
8. Extent to which personnel need to be transferred across countries/cultures.
(Particularly relevant for the Multinational Organization Model)

B. Micro-Level Considerations

Micro-considerations relating to the design, implementation, data integration, and validation of international assessment centers will be discussed next. The existing international assessment center guidelines already inform us of micro-considerations for assessment centers implemented at a single location. The present Extension to the *Guidelines* will address additional concepts that require consideration when designing and administering an international assessment endeavour.

1. Job Analyses

When an assessment center is being adapted for use in a different country/cultural context, information pertinent to similarities and differences in the target skills/dimensions and performance standards should be collected by means of job analyses. Behavioral dimensions for a specific job can be affected by national/cultural locations on several counts:

- a. Job analyses may reveal that the number, importance, and content of job-relevant behavioral dimensions may be virtually identical across cultures. In such circumstances, changes to the target dimensions being assessed will be minimal, or not required at all, permitting adoption of uniform assessment center content across cultures.
- b. Job analyses may reveal that the behavioral dimensions are identical (e.g., conflict management skills required for job success across cultures) but the acceptability of individual behaviors (i.e., acceptable conflict management behaviors/performance standards) might differ.
- c. The behavioral dimensions identified by the job analyses might be identical but may vary in their importance for job success (e.g., may be less important to job success compared to alternate skills).
- d. Alternate dimensions may emerge as being more critical for job success compared to those identified in the pre-existing assessment center (which may no longer be relevant).

Job analyses should help reveal differences or the degree of overlap in target dimensions content or importance across cultures. Such information may also be investigated by giving consideration to the contextual factors outlined earlier (e.g., overlap/differences in business models, political/economic considerations). The areas of overlap and differences should be documented and assessment center content should be adapted commensurate with the extent of differences found.

2. Assessment Techniques

The validity and/or the degree of acceptability of pre-existing assessment techniques may vary between cultures. As well, linguistic differences between cultures may require adaptation of pre-existing assessment tools. The following guidelines are suggested.

- a. **Validity** -- Assessors will need to be provided with information on the content, construct, and/or predictive validity for all target cultural populations for whom the assessment centers are designed.

- Evidence of the equivalence across cultures of target dimensions (see discussion “1b, 1c, 1d” in Job Analyses section) and assessment techniques (e.g., tests, simulations) should be provided.
- Evidence of the steps taken to enhance content, construct, and/or predictive validity should be provided.
- Non-equivalent components should not be used to compare cultural populations. However, inclusion of these components will be useful for communicating differences that exist between target cultural populations. Their inclusion will also enhance the validity of the assessment center.

b. Acceptability/Familiarity — Assessment practices common to one culture/country may not be equally as familiar to or acceptable in another culture/country. Therefore, the acceptability and familiarity of the assessment techniques and procedures for the new cultural populations need to be identified. The following process will be helpful in addressing these concerns:

- Pre-test and/or conduct surveys to determine degree of familiarity and acceptability of assessment center techniques.
- As stated in the *Guidelines*, a comprehensive communication plan should be developed to alleviate relevant concerns/unfamiliarity.
- If assesseees are unfamiliar with any assessment technique, provision of extra instructional materials (e.g., sample questions, video sequences, direct reports from assessors/assesseees) should be made.
- If individuals are resistant to the use of a technique, alternate, equally valid assessment techniques should be identified or developed (without causing the organization undue hardship).

c. Linguistic Adaptations — Linguistic differences between cultures must be taken into account when designing multi-national assessment centers. The criteria for determining whether language modifications are necessary should be based on a determination of the *language required for the job*. The International Testing

Commission provides guidelines for making linguistic adaptations (www.intestcom.org/test_adaptation.htm). It is important to note however, that linguistic adaptation is not considered to be sufficient for demonstration of validity.

3. Assessment Exercises/Simulations

As stated in the *Guidelines*, assessment center designers should be careful that the content of the assessment exercises does not favor particular groups of assessees. In the context of international assessment centers, assessees' cultural origin should not provide an unfair advantage or disadvantage for job irrelevant reasons. For instance, when applying a simulation cross-nationally, designers should be careful to ensure that stimuli and content sufficiently resemble the work setting of the new cultural setting. Similarly, during role plays, role players need to demonstrate behaviors appropriate and realistic to the target cultural population and setting.

4. Assessors

Assessors must consistently display a core set of knowledge and skills, and a high level of linguistic proficiency to ensure that the validity of their cross-cultural assessments is preserved. Gaps in knowledge or skills set must also be addressed appropriately. Appropriate guidelines are outlined below.

a. Knowledge and Skills in Cross-Cultural Assessment -- Assessors should be able to communicate clearly in the language in which the assessments are being conducted. In addition, assessors should also have prior experience with the cultural background of the assessees or have received training on cultural issues in assessment (see Assessor Training Guidelines). Finally, assessors should be knowledgeable in or have the skills for multicultural assessment including the abilities to:

- Respond to cultural diversity.
- Apply an understanding of the role that culture plays in organizational behavior and leadership.

- Apply an understanding of the ways in which socioeconomic and political factors within a country will impact job specifications and job performance requirements.
- Apply an understanding of the interaction between culture/country, job specifications, and job performance.

b. Identification of Knowledge/Skills Boundaries -- Assessors should know the limits of their competence at assessing individuals in a specific cultural context. Assessors who do not have the requisite cultural expertise or training about the cultural group being assessed should seek consultation with appropriate experts (e.g., the principal/lead consultant, local management/staff).

c. Updating Knowledge/Skills: Assessors should keep abreast of changes and advances to assessment issues relating to international assessment and/or the target cultural population.

- * The above-mentioned guidelines and qualifications (see sections 4a, 4b, and 4c) are relevant to any assessment center developers and/or consultants involved in any phase of the multinational assessment process.

5. Assessor training

Assessors should receive relevant education or training including experiences with/and knowledge of cultural, psychological, social, political, and economic material specific to the group being assessed. In addition, assessors should be able to display the following:

- a. Ability to interpret the assessment dimensions, definitions of dimensions, relationship to job performance, and examples of effective and ineffective performance *as relevant for that particular country*.
- b. A comprehensive understanding of any culturally-specific behaviors or contextual issues.
- c. Ability to simulate relevant national and cultural aspects during role

- plays/simulations (e.g., by role players).
- d. Thorough knowledge, and understanding of country- and company-specific feedback procedures and norms.
 - e. Ability to give accurate oral and written feedback in a manner appropriate to cultural norms.

6. Data integration

Consideration of cultural issues is critical for ensuring the validity of the data interpretation and integration phase. Knowledge of cultural differences in behavior can aid interpretation of observed behaviors. If significant cultural differences exist between assessors and the culture of the target population, a professional with local cultural expertise should be present during the data integration process to provide support. The expert should ensure that assessors are using a frame-of-reference appropriate to the local culture. Finally, upon completion of the assessment, assessors should communicate assessment data in terms relevant and understandable to the cultural group being assessed.

7. Validation

As specified in the *Guidelines*, the historical record of validity of an assessment center cannot be taken for granted, particularly when an assessment center has been adapted to another culture/country. The *Guidelines* indicate that prior validation research (including meta-analytic research) can be cited to confirm the validity of an assessment center. However, for global/cross-culturally adapted assessment centers, additional research evidence in support of the cross-cultural generalizability of the relevant job dimensions and assessment methods also needs to be provided. Along the same lines, any changes made to the mode of administration or purpose of the assessment must be shown to be valid for the new cultural context. This added step is necessary to ascertain the validity of the assessment center for the local culture.

Several approaches can be utilized to gather evidence in support of the validity of the adapted assessment center/method. Ideally, as per the *Guidelines*, evidence from local validation studies may serve as a useful reference/resource. In situations where such traditional validation techniques are not feasible, a genuine effort needs to be made to collect alternate validation evidence. These attempts should be directed at demonstrating the relevance and validity of the assessment *process* and *outcomes* across cultural contexts. Alternate approaches can include but are not restricted to the following:

- a. Collection of content validation evidence.
- b. Review of job performance evidence (e.g., collected through on-the-job observation, interviews with supervisors, or performance appraisal data).
- c. Interviews with relevant stakeholders and incumbents to gain insight into the validity and effectiveness of the assessment center/methods.

Finally, it is important that the technical standards and principles for validation be in line with acceptable¹ local professional and legal standards.

8. Adverse impact

Assessment center designers should work to eliminate biases and discriminatory practices at any step of assessment center design, implementation, and validation. The following guiding principles should be applied:

- a. Assessors should be aware of the local sociopolitical context when conducting assessments and making recommendations. They should develop sensitivity to and acknowledge relevant issues of oppression, sexism, elitism and racism.
- b. “Fairness” should be interpreted in the context of local policy and legislation.

¹ To the extent possible, the most well-defined professional standards should be used as the benchmark for acceptable practices, assuming that these standards are not in contradiction with local legal/professional requirements.

- c. Appropriate demographic and assessment center performance measures should be monitored to ensure that the assessment center does not adversely impact/ disadvantage members of any particular demographic or cultural group².
- d. Local validation studies are recommended to ensure the validity of the assessment center for the relevant cultural group(s).

9. Documentation

Documentation is necessary for all aspects of the assessment center that are adapted/changed and for all evidence of validity for the relevant cultural group(s). As such, documentation should include but is not restricted to the following:

- a. Justification for adapting the original assessment center/methods (e.g., differential bona fide occupational requirements, cultural norms, local laws).
- b. Description of modifications made to the assessment center content or techniques (including the rationale for these modifications).
- c. Evidence in support of the validity of the adapted assessment center for the relevant cultural group(s).
- d. Evidence in support of the equivalence of the assessment center/methods across cultures (for the unchanged areas of the assessment center).

Where possible, assessors should also assist in updating information regarding local country norms, reliability, and/or validity of an assessment tool by providing information to international or local tool developers / publishers / researchers.

Finally, it is important to note that over time, amendments to local professional and legal standards are customary. These amendments should be documented and any resulting changes to the assessment center should also be formally noted.

² Adverse impact occurs when a particular process has a differential and negative impact on a given demographic group. For example, if a selection assessment center were to consistently screen out a disproportionately high percentage of females as compared to the percentage of males screened out, the assessment center could be said to have “adverse impact”.

References

The guidelines and their corresponding extensions have been developed to be compatible with the following documents:

- American Psychological Association Public Interest Directorate and Council of Representatives. (2002). *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists*. www.apa.org/pi/multiculturalguidelines.pdf. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurements in Education. (1999). *Standards for Educational and Psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- American Psychological Association Council of Representatives. (1990). *APA Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations*. www.apa.org/pi/guide.html. Boston, MA: American Psychological Association.
- International Testing Commission. (April, 2000). *International Test Commission Test Adaptation Guidelines*. www.intestcom.org/test_adaptation.htm: International Testing Commission.
- Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology Inc., American Psychological Association. (1987). *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures (3rd ed.)*. College Park, MD.

Glossary

Assessee: An individual whose competencies are measured by an assessment center.

Assessment Center: A process employing multiple techniques and multiple assessors to produce judgments regarding the extent to which a participant displays selected competencies.

Assessor: An individual trained to observe, record, classify, and make reliable judgments about the behaviors of assessees.

Competency: Also called *dimension*. The constellation or group of behaviors that are specific, observable, and verifiable and that can be reliably and logically classified together and that are related to job success.

Dimension: See *Competency*.

Feedback: Information comparing actual performance to a standard or desired level of performance.

High (or Low) Fidelity: The extent to which an assessment center simulation requires the assessee to actually display behaviors related to one or more selected competencies. Fidelity is related to the realism of the simulation as compared to an actual job situation, task, etc.

Job Analysis: The process (typically a combination of techniques such as interviews with and observations of incumbents; job checklists; interviews with upper-level managers/ executives) used to determine the competencies linked to success or failure in a job, job role, or job grouping.

Reliability: The extent to which a measurement process yields the same results (given identical conditions) across repeated measurements.

Simulation: An exercise or technique designed to elicit behaviors related to dimensions of performance on the job requiring the participants to respond behaviorally to situational stimuli.

Validity: The extent to which a measurement tool or process, such as an assessment center, yields useful results. Multiple validities might be measured (e.g., “construct,” “content,” “face,” “predictive,” “social”) depending upon the questions being explored and the tool or process being investigated.