

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

---

---

**The Use of Assessment Centers in the  
Law Enforcement Promotional Process**

---

---

**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

---

---

**By  
Michael S. Rutherford**

**New Braunfels Police Department  
New Braunfels, Texas  
January 2010**

## **ABSTRACT**

The use of assessment centers in the law enforcement promotional process is relevant to law enforcement because law enforcement agencies should strive to use the process in which the most qualified candidate is promoted, not the most popular. The purpose of this research is to examine the use of assessment centers in modern law enforcement agencies and determine if this provides the most consistent method available to ensure that only the most qualified candidates are promoted. Additionally, it will explore the question of whether or not there is a single, specific instrument available to measure objectivity in the promotion process. The method of inquiry used by the researcher consisted of a review of journals, articles, Internet sites, and a written survey instrument. The researcher discovered that of the agencies that responded to the survey, the overwhelming majority felt as though assessment centers are the fairest manner in which to conduct the promotional process, while only half of those agencies actually use that process.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction. ....	1
Review of Literature . ....	2
Methodology . ....	4
Findings . ....	5
Discussion/Conclusions . ....	7
References . ....	10
Appendix	

## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement has a variety of options at hand when it comes to promotions. The underlying issue is that there are no consistent methods to promote qualified candidates within a field that essentially operates within a similar set of goals and ideals worldwide. There is a better process available today to ensure that only the most qualified law enforcement officers are promoted to supervisory positions. It is believed that law enforcement as a whole could benefit from the use of assessment centers in that, if used properly, they would become the most objective method available in choosing its future supervisors.

The purpose of this research is to examine the use of assessment centers in today's law enforcement agencies and to determine if this avenue provides the most consistent method available to guarantee only the highest qualified officers are promoted. Additionally, it will explore the question as to whether or not there is a single, specific instrument available to measure objectivity in the promotion process. The research will consist of a review of journals, articles, Internet sites, and a written survey instrument.

It is anticipated that there will be a variety of opinions on this issue mainly due to the fact that this concept is new to some agencies. Assessment centers could also be a difficult concept for veteran officers to understand because they may feel they have earned the right to promote because of their tenure, regardless of their individual abilities. Additionally, this particular method can prove to be cost prohibitive to many agencies, especially those located in smaller communities. It is the intent of this researcher to outline the benefits of assessment centers to those agencies that are still

undecided in the methodology of their promotional process. Additionally, defining a consistent, objective manner that ensures only the best candidates are promoted to supervisory positions within the field of law enforcement is desired.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Due to the fact that the topic of assessment centers could be new to those within the field of law enforcement, it is imperative to define this concept as it applies to this research. A comprehensive definition of the term assessment center was found on the Internet site BNET, and it stated: "A process whereby a group of participants undertakes a series of job-related exercises under observation, so that skills, competencies, and character traits can be assessed" (BNET, 2009). It is abundantly clear by way of this definition that assessment centers are not solely used by law enforcement agencies but are capable of being used in a wide variety of applications throughout the world. In the law enforcement application alone, the assessment has been utilized to select and appoint candidates to positions all the way up the career ladder to chief of police.

Hale (2005b) outlined a core principal and foundation of assessment centers when he stated that assessment centers are unique because they guarantee that "all candidates will be evaluated impartially, fairly, and objectively based upon their demonstrated ability to perform the tasks necessary to succeed in their potential new positions" (p. 86). These ideals are exactly why agencies across the nation and Texas must examine assessment centers as a form of promotion in order to promote only those that are best qualified to the next level of their careers. Law enforcement must be progressive in their quest to provide the best quality service for the citizens they serve. One of first ways to ensure this is to promote only qualified officers to positions of

leadership. While seniority or tenure should certainly be taken into account in a promotional process, it should not be the sole basis for advancing one's career.

Another thing that must be considered, especially in the litigious society in which the world has become today, is whether or not an assessment center can stand up to a challenge in court. According to Hale (2005a), if the assessment center included a thorough job analysis of the position being evaluated and proper guidelines were adhered to during design and administration, then an assessment center is easily defended if challenged. Hughes (2006) identified a secondary portion of job analysis when he said, "if job analysis information is already available, it should be carefully evaluated for currency and relevance to the position before proceeding with identification of relevant dimensions of job performance" (p. 107). This step is imperative in ensuring validity in the assessment center process.

Important points to define at this juncture are the disadvantages associated with assessment centers. Probably the largest obstacle to overcome, especially for smaller agencies, is the cost involved. Although there are ways to reduce costs, such as not using a consultant or using assessors that are in the local region to avoid associated costs, it must also be remembered that the process involving preparing for an assessment center is a time intensive process.

Hale (2005a) also clearly illustrated the importance of not relying solely on one dimension of a promotional process while evaluating a candidate for advancement when he said, "An assessment center can predict with uncanny accuracy whether a person has the capacity to perform, but may not predict how the person will perform in that position" (p. 20). It is important to note that assessment centers are not beyond

reproach. For instance, a person may have the abilities needed to perform but may not have the drive or desire to be ultimately successful in their new position. That is precisely why assessment center results should not stand as the sole determining factor on whether to promote. This is when it is imperative to combine past work history as well as performance evaluations with the results of the assessment center, prior to reaching a decision on who should be promoted. Baumgart and Cosner (2000) clarified that probably the most important aspect of the assessor's input when they stated: "Assessors must evaluate candidates against clearly defined standards and not against each other" (p. 4). This concept, in conjunction with the candidate's past work history and performance, should ensure that only the most qualified candidates are promoted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research question to be examined considers whether or not the use of assessment centers in the promotion process of today's law enforcement community provides for the most qualified candidate to be promoted. The researcher believes that if a majority of today's law enforcement agencies utilized the assessment center process, only the most qualified candidates would be promoted, thus enhancing the professionalism of the law enforcement field. Further, if officers at all levels were aware of the assessment center process and that it is designed to measure one's abilities for the job at hand, then the officers that desire to promote will begin preparing themselves through education and training early in their career.

The method of inquiry will include a review of articles, Internet sites, journals, and a survey distributed to 16 Texas law enforcement agencies of various sizes. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings related to the subject

of the use of assessment centers in the law enforcement promotional process will be a survey. The survey will consist of nine questions, distributed to 16 survey participants from different sized law enforcement agencies from varying geographic regions across the state of Texas. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in a return of 12 of the 16 surveys distributed, or a return rate of 75%. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed examining the responses in an effort to determine if the assessment center is the fairest method in which to promote officers in today's law enforcement agencies.

## **FINDINGS**

Many of the law enforcement agencies that responded to the survey instrument indicated that they believe that assessment centers are the fairest manner in which to conduct the promotional process. Seventy-five percent indicated that assessment centers were the most objective; however, only 50% of all that responded currently use assessment centers in their promotion process. Perhaps the most interesting point to this researcher was that some agencies, 25% of those responding, felt that assessment centers overlook a critical element: the individual candidate's past work history and performance.

One of the agencies reported that although they are currently using an assessment center process, they are examining a system that is merit based. This system allows that once a candidate qualifies for promotion to sergeant, that person's abilities are rated by his peers. Once a pool of 20 candidates has been established, they are then rated by the current sergeants who pare the list down to 12 candidates. The list is then passed on to current lieutenants who further examine the candidates



and develop a list of six candidates to be passed to the chief of police for review and selection. Although the inherent objectivity of the assessment center is not included, this process appears to be a fair process due to the input of many different levels of officers, including the candidate's peers. This process incorporates the candidate's work history and performance. One of the other responses indicated a combination of assessment center and traditional interview process, while others combined qualifications, written tests, and interview panels.

Of the responding agencies, 25% indicated they were civil service, and the remaining 75% were at-will. The breakdown of agency type is as follows: police departments accounted for 83.3% of the respondents, sheriff's offices accounted for 8.3% of the respondents, and state agencies accounted for 8.3% of the respondents. The size of agencies was also well represented in this survey. There were agencies with fewer than 20 officers (16.6%); agencies with 21-50 officers (16.6%); agencies with 51-100 officers (16.6%); agencies with 101-500 officers (33.3%); and agencies with over 500 officers (16.6%). The cost of the assessment center was not a factor as to whether or not agencies utilized this process. While 83.3% of the agencies currently conduct assessment centers in house and 16.6% currently outsource theirs, most indicated that they have tried both methods.

The ranks for which assessment centers are utilized run from assistant chief all the way to corporal, to include captain, lieutenant, and sergeant. When examining the responding departments and their use of assessment centers in the promotion process, it must be acknowledged that not all agencies have each rank listed available to them in their organizational chart. For instance, some of the smaller agencies do not have

assistant chiefs, commanders, captains, or perhaps even corporals in their rank structure; therefore, the percentages are off. Of the responding agencies, 17% utilized the assessment center to promote to officers to the rank of assistant chief, captain, and corporal. The rank of sergeant and lieutenant were promoted by use of assessment centers in 42% of the responding agencies. None of the responding agencies utilized assessment centers to promote to the rank of deputy chief or commander.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The use of assessment centers in the law enforcement promotion process was examined to determine if there is a better way in today's law enforcement community to ensure that only the most qualified candidates are promoted. The goal of this research was to explore the use of assessment centers as they relate to the law enforcement application. Moreover, it examined if assessment centers are the most consistent method available in which to ensure that only the most qualified candidates are promoted to positions of leadership within the law enforcement profession. Also to be examined is whether there is a single, specific instrument in which to determine the most qualified candidate for promotion.

The researcher hypothesized that there would be differences of opinion on both sides of the issue. It was also hypothesized that assessment centers would be the most objective tool available in which to ensure that only qualified candidates would be promoted. From the findings, it can be concluded that although the majority of responding agencies agreed that assessment centers were the fairest manner in which to conduct promotions, the human element cannot and should not be overlooked. While it is imperative that only the best candidates are promoted, it is equally important to

consider the individual candidates' past work ethic and job performance in order to make an objective, informed opinion that will benefit the agency. The researcher was able to conclude that the findings did support the hypothesis that there would be differences of opinion on the issue of assessment centers. This is supported by the findings in the survey instrument.

Further, the researcher found that the hypothesis of assessment centers being the most objective manner in which to conduct promotions was not totally supported by research. This is due to the fact that the human element should not be overlooked. Although a candidate may do well in an assessment center, he or she may not be prepared to lead others on a daily basis due to their past work ethic and job performance. Although the use of assessment centers in law enforcement is not widespread, most agencies and officers know of this concept and what is intended to be measured. The researcher realizes that the relatively few number of responses does not reflect a profession-wide response; however, because of the different sizes of agencies that did respond, and the varied geographical diversity, it is believed that a sample group was identified. While the human element must be considered, it is not be the sole determining factor. The human element should be used in conjunction with an objective instrument, such as an assessment center.

The study of the use of assessment centers in law enforcement today is necessary as law enforcement must continue to be vigilant in ensuring that a candidate is not promoted based upon his personality and popularity, but because of his knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform in that role. Today's law enforcement stands to benefit from the results of this research in that they can examine the use of the

assessment center, along with any other influences, to ensure that only the candidates who have prepared themselves and have the aptitude and skills needed are promoted. This will serve to enhance the credibility of law enforcement supervision across the country. Hughes (2006) summed it up when he stated, "One of the many challenges facing law enforcement administrators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to identify qualified individuals for selection and promotion" (p. 111).

## REFERENCES

- Assessment Center. (2009). In BNET Business Dictionary. Retrieved February 8, 2009, from <http://dictionary.bnet.com/definition/assessment+center.html>
- Baumgart, W., & Cosner, T. (2000). An effective assessment center program essential components. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 69(6), 1-5.
- Hale, C. (2005a). Pros and cons of assessment centers. *Law and Order*, 53(4), 18-20.
- Hale, C. (2005b) Candidate evaluation and scoring. *Law and Order*, 53 (12), pg. 86.
- Hughes, F. (2006). Does the benefit outweigh the cost? *The Police Chief*, 73 (8), 106-109, 111.

## APPENDIX

### The Use of Assessment Centers in the Law Enforcement Promotion Process

The purpose of this research is to determine if Assessment Centers as used in the police promotion process produce the most qualified candidates for promotion. This research is further intended to provide information to agencies that are searching for answers to questions involving equity in the promotional process. Thank you in advance for taking a few minutes to complete this survey and return to me.

1. What is the type of your agency? Police Department \_\_, Sheriff's Office \_\_, or other\_\_.
2. What is the size of your department? <20 \_\_, 21-50 \_\_, 51-100 \_\_, 101-500 \_\_, >500 \_\_.
3. Is your agency, Civil Service \_\_, At will \_\_?
4. Does your agency currently use assessment centers for promotions? Yes \_\_, no \_\_.
5. If yes to #4, what ranks are promoted utilizing assessment centers? Asst. Chief \_\_, Deputy Chief \_\_, Commander \_\_, Captain \_\_, Lieutenant \_\_, Sergeant \_\_, and Corporal \_\_.
6. Do you feel that assessment centers are fairest manner in which to conduct the promotional process? Yes \_\_, No \_\_.
7. If no to #6, what do you feel is the fairest manner in which to accomplish fairness in the promotional process?
8. If your agency currently utilizes assessment centers, do you conduct them in-house? \_\_, outsource them \_\_, or some combination of both \_\_>
9. Is cost a deciding factor as to whether or not your agency utilizes assessment centers in the promotion process? Yes \_\_, No \_\_.

Thank you again for your time.