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SOLVING PERSONNEL PROBLEMS WITH

AN ASSESSMENT CENTER

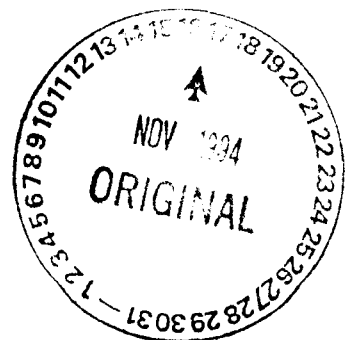A RESEARCH PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

As the problems of local government grow more complex, the demand for creative responses and legal personnel procedures grows. For any local jurisdiction to successfully represent and satisfy the needs of its citizens, the quality and ability of its personnel are crucial. An assessment center could be the technology that can aid local government to change "personnel; the problem" into "personnel; the solution to the problem".

An assessment center is a multi-measure multi-assessor method of personnel evaluation for predicting successful performance on the job. By using the assessment center technology, local governments can strengthen and update their personnel systems. The early identification of managerial potential, the examination of manager's strengths and weaknesses, job counseling and career development, efficient and effective training programs, fair and legally defensible selection procedures -- all can be enhanced through greater use of the assessment center concept. While widely used in private organizations, the public sector is just realizing the importance of and the variety of uses for assessment centers.

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The law enforcement community has joined ranks and become increasingly disposed to the use of assessment centers as a tool for employee placement and promotion. Most law enforcement personnel have heard of assessment centers, but most have not participated in an assessment center and surprisingly, most have indicated that their departments do not use assessment centers. Through a discussion of the assessment center process, its major elements and how to implement them, this paper seeks to suggest how many of the problems that local government face today in the administration of their personnel systems can be more effectively resolved. While future challenges for public personnel are great, the comprehensive use of assessment centers can begin a process of making personnel and its administration work for the benefit of staff and the citizens.

PERSONNEL CHALLENGES OF THE 1990'S

The enactment of the Intergovernmental Personnel Act of 1970, provided Federal financial and technical assistance to state and local governments to strengthen and update their personnel systems.Over the years, the importance of and the desire of professional public personnel administration has increased.

Even with the many improvements in personnel management which marked the 1970's and early 1980's, a survey of city, county and state governments (conducted by the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties and the Council of State Governments in cooperation with the Office of Personnel Management) indicated that personnel systems were seen as only "sometimes" effective in aiding top management with implementing its policies and programs.1 Moreover, these personnel systems were characterized as only "sometimes" providing the flexibility necessary for meeting the various needs of various employee groups, for enabling the hiring and retaining of competent employees and for aiding the fulfillment of equal opportunity responsibilities to minorities, women, and disadvantaged groups.2 Local governments face the need for selection and promotion procedures which comply with the standards of business necessity and job relatedness established by the Supreme Court in Griggs vs. Duke Power Company (1971).3 The survey results, referenced above, show that approximately one-third of the cities and counties "do not do an adequate job of job analysis or work without job analysis".4

Personnel departments make major contributions to the success or failure of local government. Administering human resources in public organizations can either be viewed as a "problem to be solved" or as a "solution to problems".

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The efficiency and effectiveness of government service delivery depend upon the quality and development of those persons selected to provide services. Sound personnel decisions can only be made when adequate and appropriate information about the types of jobs and the skills, knowledge and abilities for successful performance of these jobs made available to the decision makers. A comprehensive systematic personnel system is essential to the gathering of such information.

Today's legal environment places an even greater premium on the need for such information. Along with meeting equal employment opportunity and affirmative action (AA/EEO) responsibilities, public managers striving to obtain greater productivity within the legal environment face multiple challenges. The manager must develop: 1. valid selection procedures, 2. quality training programs, 3. wage and salary levels, 4. performance appraisal systems. These challenges can be viewed as either fragmented, sperate problems or studies within the comprehensive goal of making personnel both more responsive to management and more productive.

Though many different methods have been tried and tested, the trend of management, both private and government agencies, tend to be turning towards the use of assessment centers to achieve answers to challenges placed on modern management. Personnel managers striving to meet federal requirements are turning to assessment centers as a viable option.

WHAT IS AN ASSESSMENT CENTER?

The Assessment Center Method "refers to a group oriented standardized series of activities which provide a basis for judgment or predictions of human behavior believed or known to be relevant to work performed in an organizational setting".5
An assessment center, then, can be thought of as both a place and a process. It is a place where people participate in a variety of measurement techniques designed to identify their strengths and weaknesses for some specific purpose: placement, upgrading or development. It is the process of bringing together information from a variety of sources and arriving at a summary recommendation and/or description of the individual candidates being evaluated. "This method uses simulated, real life situations designed to place the person being evaluated into a milieu in which he or she will have a full opportunity to exhibit job-related skills closely identified with the position to be filled."6

Those behaviors which have been determined through a job analysis to be crucial to job success are at the core of the exercises which make up an assessment center. The focus on job related behaviors is important both professionally and legally. By centering on behaviors, the predicted value of the assessment

center method is increased over traditional intelligence or
psychological tests.7 This is because the behaviors that are
displayed by a candidate during the exercise can be expected to
be displayed by the candidate in a similar situation on the job.
Using behavior as the basis for evaluation also forces both the
assessors of the exercise and the candidates to focus on "real
data" -- data that is perceived during the course of the
assessment center itself. The assessor is less likely to project
his or her motives or values on the candidates.

There are two approaches to evaluation and validity which
can be used for an assessment center; criterion related validity
measures and content validity models. Criterion related validity
addresses the question: Is the assessment center predictive of
success on the job? Each of the three types of criterion related
models (classical, predictive correlational, modified predictive
correlation and group comparison) share some of the same
strengths and weaknesses. Each model allows the personnel
department to evaluate, over time, the relative success of each
employee based on behavioral measurement. These measurements can
be used to update performance appraisal systems and forecast
training and employment needs. The classical correlation study
differs from the modified version in that the modified version
allows feedback to the employee about his or her performance.

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The problems with criterion related validity models are that they: 1. Cost a lot in follow-up for measuring employee performance over time; 2. require that the organization continually re-evaluate; and 3. use experimental designs in which some employees go through the assessment center while others are excluded. Although this method is considered most scientific, it has not been widely used primarily because of the requirements for longitudinal data.

While criterion related models are difficult to establish by standardizing the assessment center experience for each assessor and candidate, greater validity can be achieved. This can be accomplished if assessor groups are mixed by race and sex and are on the same level with management within the organization. Ideally assessors should be chosen from jurisdictions or organizations outside the immediate environment in order to minimize the effect of bias by assessors who might already know the candidates. Care should be taken to recognize the 'critical assessors" (Those who are unable to distinguish between the various traits or levels of performance.), by monitoring the evaluation process to asure that initial evaluations of candidates are made on an individual basis. Time is allotted at the end of each exercise for individual comments and scoring by assessors. Group consensus is reached on each candidate at the end of the assessment center.

Interaction between the assessors and candidates should be kept to a minimum prior to or during the assessment center. The actual administrative approach should be standardized by presenting each candidate with standard activity schedules and the same time limits for preparing and performing each exercise. Assigned roles that are used during a role play exercise should be randomly passed out to the candidates.

It is also important to address the other form of validity testing, content validity. This evaluation method addresses the question: "Does the procedure accurately simulate the real job environment and the skills, knowledge and abilities required". Content validity models have been found to be legally valid by the Supreme Court in Washington vs. Davis (1976).8 Here the emphasis is on identifying the critical components of the job through on the job observation, traditional job analysis, incumbent questionnaires and reference to the dictionary of occupational titles.

Knowledgable persons should analyze jobs and identify job dimensions in behavioral terms. This background effort feeds the development of appropriate exercises for accessment center use. The common rule of thumb is that at least two exercises should measure a representative sample of behaviors for each dimension. The exercises themselves should reflect both the content and the context of the job. John Haymaker, in his doctoral dissertation, outlines a complete step-by-step approach to this type of

validation based on Musselle and Smith's work and content validity.9

For an assessment center to be valid and reliable, a set of minimum standards should be adhered to. (See Appendix A)

These standards, developed by the third International Congress on the assessment center method, should guide any unit of government which is considering using the assessment center method.10 These standards are listed in Table 1. In summary, although a study over time is obviously the most important test, if job analysis generates relevant and job related information which can be documented, then content validity is ensured. However, each assessment center requires its own type of evaluation depending upon the goal of the center --- placement, promotion or training and development. The important consideration is that managers must realize why conducting good job analysis is important, why it is important to have an assessor training and why it is necessary to document observations.11

THE INCREASING USE OF ASSESSMENT CENTERS

The modern day assessment center process was first introduced by the Germans during World War I. The Germans used some form of the process for selecting personnel in intelligence positions.12 Assessment centers were initially used by the military in World Wars I and II for the early identification of officer potential. This technology was later brought to the civilian section in 1956, by A.T.& T., which has assessed more than 70,000 candidates for first level manager positions.13

Interestingly, the concept was studied in an academic setting as early as the 1930's. Henry Murray, a Harvard University professor studied "the personnel selection applications of situational research design" which closely resembled current assessment center models.14

The candidates chosen by the assessment center method used by Murray, in this project "have been found to be two or three times more likely to be successful at higher management levels than those promoted on the basis of supervisory judgements".15 Using assessment center technology for selecting individuals to perform in managerial positions allows " the chance rate of picking a winner" to more than double over traditional methods such as paper and pencil exams or basing determinations on past experience, resumes or references.16

Since A.T.&T.'s introduction of assessment center processes, hundreds of companies such as IBM, Sears, General Electric, and J.C. Penny have come to recognize its potential. In recent years the federal government has also utilized the assessment center approach. Some of the agencies which have used the concept include the Internal Revenue Service, the assessment center method has also been used by the U.S. Civil Service Commission, the Office of Management and Budget, the Federal Aviation Agency and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Wisconsin and Illinois State government agencies have also used this method.17

Several local governments in Georgia (Rome, Athens, East Point, LaGrange, Valdasota, and Macon Bib County) are currently using assessment centers. City officials in Athens stated that the approach is "viable and effective".18 Rome is pleased with its experience in selecting police and fire fighters and has begun using assessment centers to place transit operators and other employee groups. In addition, several Texas governments, specifically Bellaire, Alvin, Grand Prairie and Missouri City are involved in assessment center testing. Primarily focusing on the selection and promotion of police and fire fighters these governments have found the assessment center process, feasible, desirable and as improvement in making individual personnel changes.

For these localities, then, the problem of obtaining valid unbiased selection and promotion procedures has been reduced through the utilization of this process. The Department of Community Affairs for the State of Georgia has taken an active role in disseminating this technology to local government in Georgia. Kathleen Robinson was primarily involved with police and fire departments in a program designed to develop standardized promotion and selection techniques.19 The long range goals of the program included state monitoring and revisions of assessment centers to ensure validity in the establishment of regional assessment centers that are used by local governments with each covering a portion of the costs.

The Department and Institute of Government at the University of Georgia have developed plans to certify assessors and provide a pool of qualified assessors when needed to implement a large scale regional center. Satisfied with their performance in the police and fire departments, many local governments in Georgia are studying the process for its potential to solve many other crucial problems in personnel administration. Unfortunately, in Texas the use of assessment centers has not been coordinated by any one centralized state organization, rather, most assessment centers are performed by private consultants.

ADDITIONAL ISSUES

There are several issues in conducting assessment centers which should be considered to insure fair and equitable treatment of candidates, not only for validity purposes, but also for psychological reasons. Just as a paper and pencil test is stressful, so to is an assessment center. Performing badly in an assessment center can prove very damaging to candidates, and every effort should be made to counsel them, even if training and development has not been designed into the assessment center. Many people have problems with such openly competitive

situations, and the stress caused by the exercise should be discussed with the assessors prior to center evecution and with the candidates afterwards.

In the Alvin Police Department's assessment center we found the speech exercise to be particularly stressful for most of our candidates who are not experienced in speaking before a group of "status" people. The assessment center should serve to develop both the assessors and the candidates by using reflective specific feedback, also the issue of competent assessors is critical. Every effort should be made to have an adequate and effective training program. Even though assessors may know the job intimately, efforts should be made to improve their observing and interviewing skills. Accordingly, the training program should

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be documented and continuously improved because the assessment center serves as a developmental process for assessors. As assessors become more experienced, their ability to observe and differentiate between good and bad behaviors will increase.[20] Supervisory personnel who function as assessors will also increase their ability to perform not only their daily management duties, but also better participate in performance appraisal systems.

EEO law and affirmative action regulations require that the selection and promotion method be standardized (or reliable) and valid. The court requires that the procedures comply with the job relatedness test. Therefore, job analysis should be comprehensive, systematic, documented and defensible. The job dimensions used in the assessment center should be weighted in terms of their relative importance to the particular job analyzed. While the assessment center process has been applauded for its ability to remain free of biased and prejudice, in 1977, the method was challenged as a selection and promotion device in the City of Omaha.[21] In question was its reliability. The City of Omaha's assessment center process was ruled legal, but not before it was compared to the "Ethical Standards of Conduct of Assessment Centers," criteria used by the courts.[22] Consequently, the ethical standards should be used by local governments as a model for selecting assessment center packages.

Finally, one criticism of assessment centers is their cost in comparison to the traditional methods of job interviews or paper and pencil tests. While the initial costs are greater for the assessment center, the higher quality and the amount of information generated through it were also greater. Assessment centers vary in cost with estimates ranging from $20.00 to $1000.00 per person. It should be realized that the cost of an assessment center will vary greatly. One method of evaluating the cost of the assessment center for personnel function is an informal cost benefit analysis as suggested on the next page.

COST OF A TYPICAL ASSESSMENT CENTER

1. Preparation of the assessment center package
    and assessor manual -- this includes consultant
    fees. It is important to remember that if the
    consultant works with your personnel department
    in the development of the package and manual,
    this should be a one time cost.

2. Assessor time -- this includes time off the job
    during training and the assessment center itself.

3. Materials - this includes photo copying, printing,
    mail, paper and pencils.

4. Candidate time -- for selection. This may include
    the cost of bringing candidates in for the
    assessment   center   (depending   upon   your
    government's particular policy on this matter);
    for promotion, this includes time off the job for
    both participation in the assessment center
    and any feedback or debriefing sessions.
    Travel costs, food, and lodging must also be
    considered.

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BENEFITS OF A TYPICAL ASSESSMENT CENTER

A. Compliance with the law - Assessment centers meet the requirements of business necessity and job relatedness which are required under affirmative action/equal employment law. The rise of valid selection and promotion procedures can save future legal costs.

B. Quality of personnel selected or promoted - If the person who scores highest in job dimensions required for a particular job is selected or promoted, then the community should receive the maximum benefits from agency personnel.

C. Savings from short tenure employment - Following the logic in No. 2, the higher the quality of employee, the less likely will be the need for termination due to non-performance. Included in the cost of termination due to down time between employee exit and a new selection to fill the position, is recruitment, selection, and training of the new employee and the loss of training taken with the fired employee.

D. Savings on other personnel costs - Savings can be realized by more efficient utilization of all personnel

functions. For instance, by using the data generated in the assessment center to determine training needs, a greater return on appropriate training programs can be realized.

E. Repeated usage - As with all valid standardized personnel tools, benefits can be incurred through repeated use which will reduce the cost of centers from a long term perspective.

F. Assessor skill enhancement - Much of the literature supports the idea that skills gained by the assessors in accurate observations or recordings of work performance will also enhance a supervisor's ability to develop and implement appraisal systems as well as provide more effective feedback to employees about their job performance.

Several methods should be in place to reduce the cost of using assessment center technology. First, cost savings can be realized by taking a comprehensive perspective of the personnel function and sharing information among specialists within an organization as suggested by this paper. Second, this technology can be most effectively used for two types of positions: high level jobs where the political and financial cost of hiring are

high (such as city manager) or where there are multiple people in the same position (such as police captain). Third, costs can be greatly reduced if units of local government share the technology.

In summary, while the initial cost of an assessment center may seem great, if the center is designed correctly it can be used repeatedly, thereby stretching the costs over a period of time.

SUMMARY

Assessment centers have been used for a number of years by many private organizations. Because of government regulations and improved personnel training, public organizations and local governments have learned about the technique and its value as a personnel tool. The success of the assessment center "process" will be determined by the center's content validity (job relatedness), and the quality (training/experience) of the assessors.[23] "Assessment centers serve to select managers of the future."[24] Assessment centers are "... as valid or more valid than any other currently used technique."[25]

If the assessment center and its elements are viewed from a long term organizational perspective, the process can be used for a variety of purposes: 1. Long range organizational planning,

2. Goals setting, 3. Performance appraisal systems, 4. Job enrichment, 5. Upward mobility plans, 6. Improved training and development opportunities, legal selection and promotion procedures.

All of these goals can be served by fully using the information generated by a comprehensive, valid assessment center. By viewing the assessment center process as a diagnostic tool, the personnel function, rather than being a problem, can begin to offer solutions to meet the future human resource needs of local governments.

Appendix A

STANDARDS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
FOR ASSESSMENT CENTER OPERATION

1. Multiple assessment techniques must be used. At least one of these techniques must be a simulation.

2. Multiple assessors must be used. These assessors must receive training prior to participation in center.

3. Judgements resulting in an outcome (i.e., recommendation for promotions, specific training or development or selection) must be based on pooling information from assessors and techniques.

4. An overall evaluation of behavior must be made by the assessors at a separate time from observation of the behavior.

5. Simulation exercises are used. These exercises are developed to tap a variety of pre-determined behaviors. They have been pre-tested prior to use to insure that the techniques provide reliable objective and relevant behavioral information for the organization in question.

6. The dimensions, attributes, characteristics or qualities evaluated by the assessment center are determined by an analysis of job behaviors.

7. The techniques used in the assessment center are designed to provide information which is used in evaluating the dimensions, attributes, or qualities previously determined.

ENDNOTES

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17. Charles Wise, "Assessment Centers in the Public Sector" Public Productivity Review, Vol. 3, No. 4, Spring/Summer, 1979, P. 84.

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22. Ibid. P. 45.

23. Gary E. Brown, "What You Always Wanted to Know About Assessment Centers But Were Afraid to Ask." The Police Chief, (June 1978), P. 65.

24. Ibid. P. 65.

25. Ibid. P. 65.

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