

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

ASSESSMENT CENTERS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT:
A USERS GUIDE

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ASSESSMENT CENTERS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT: A USERS GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the use of assessment centers in the workplace. Further, there is no reason to suspect this trend will reverse itself in the foreseeable future. In fact, the law enforcement community has joined ranks and become increasingly disposed to the use of assessment centers as a tool for employee placement and/or promotion.

Although most law enforcement personnel have heard of assessment centers, surprisingly few of them have ever participated in the assessment center process. Fewer still, have a working knowledge of the process.

A good deal of information has been published on the subject of assessment centers, however, much of the available literature only concerns itself with the history and evolution of assessment centers. In most cases the writings are aimed at "management" and not published for use by an assessment center participant.

This research paper is intended to serve as a "nuts and bolts" guide for (law enforcement) assessment center participants. The paper will provide the reader with a working definition of assessment centers as well as a basic understanding of the assessment center process itself. Careful review of unpublished documents and manuals studied in conjunction with published materials and personal

interviews, provides adequate and detailed information sufficient to answer the following questions:

- What is an assessment center?
- Why use assessment centers?
- How did the assessment center process evolve?
- How to prepare for an assessment center?
- What are the assessment center problems/exercises like?
- How are "assessors" selected?
- How will my assessment center performance be graded?
- What are the "pro's and con's" of the assessment center process?

What Is An Assessment Center?

To begin any study of assessment centers it is important to have a straightforward working definition of the term. It is a method of testing, grading, or rating the job related skills of applicants for selection or promotion. "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."¹ In simpler terms: "Assessment Center is a method using job related simulation to identify managerial potential."²

The Evolution of Assessment Centers

It has been suggested that some form of the assessment center process has existed since biblical or even prehistoric

times. Man pitted against man or brother against brother for the purpose of determining rank or position is not a new concept.

However, the modern day assessment center process was introduced by Germans during World War I. The Germans used some form of the process for selecting personnel to serve in intelligence positions.³

During the Second World War, the British War Office and the U.S. Office of Strategic Services experimented with assessment centers in the selection of military personnel.

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.⁴

In 1956, A T & T pioneered the use of the assessment center process in the corporate arena. A T & T's research in the area led other corporate giants to jump on the bandwagon. IBM, General Electric, J.C. Penny, Sears, Standard Oil, and a host of others currently use the process. Presently, there are over three hundred centers in operation in the private sector.⁵

Many agencies within the federal government also use the assessment center process. The IRS first tried assessment centers in 1969. They were followed, in quick succession, by the Civil Service Commission, Office of Management and the Budget, Federal Aviation Administration, Social Security Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and others.

In the early 1970's Fort Collins, Colorado and Kansas City, Missouri had two of the first police departments to conduct assessment centers. Since 1971 many other police agencies have used the process: San Clemente, San Jose, New York, Riverside, San Antonio, Eugene, Philadelphia, Palm Springs, and several sheriffs departments.⁶

As assessment centers have evolved, so have studies to determine their validity as a personnel selection method. The Byham report which surfaced in 1971 indicated that twenty three validity studies revealed only one negative finding.⁷ In 1975, Moses and Boehm reported "respectable predictive validities" for minorities and women with respect to the assessment center process.⁸

Moreover, the A T & T Management Progress Study (Bray and Grant, 1966) is considered the cornerstone of validity evidence for assessment centers. 422 candidates were assessed and the results were set aside for research. Without expounding on tedious formulas and figures, the results were positive; indicating assessment centers are a valid predictor of future performance.⁹ Most published studies seem to favor the use of assessment centers as a valid and successful predictor of personnel performance, however, very few, if any of the studies reveal why assessment centers work.

Why Use The Assessment Center Process?

This is a valid question. Perhaps the best reason to use assessment centers is that they currently seem to be the

most reliable way to match the proper candidate to the position to be filled.¹⁰ Further, they have been shown capable of "...finding the requisite talent to handle ever more demanding government jobs."¹¹ The assessment center approach is more broad-based than traditional selection methods and candidates seem to feel that they are, therefore, a fairer method.¹² Experts in the field seem to agree that the assessment center experience is more in-line with E.E.O.C. standards than other methods. This rationale may be the single most compelling reason for using assessment centers.

Not surprisingly, there are problems inherent in the assessment center process. First, assessment centers are time consuming. As a rule, this method require at least half a day to complete. It could be argued that a "proper" assessment center could not be successfully completed in half a day. Most often, assessment centers required one to three days to complete. Expense is the next major drawback. Supplies, overtime salaries, and assessor's fees or expenses are just a few of the financial considerations. Finally, assessment centers have been known to cause considerable anxiety for assessors and assesses alike.¹³

On balance, when time and money limitations can be overcome, the assessment center process remains the most effective forum for the selection and/or promotion of law enforcement personnel.

PREPARING FOR AN ASSESSMENT CENTER

Even the uninitiated, first-time assessment center participant can affect his or her performance. The participant will rarely have advance, detailed knowledge about the form and content of his assessment center, nonetheless, a game plan is both possible and practical. The participant should expect to be critiqued on his or her physical appearance, particularly, dress and overall demeanor. In nearly all cases, participants will be graded on one or more written exercises, oral presentations, or, a combination of the two. The participant will surely be tested on his or her job related knowledge, skills, or expertise. With these general expectations in mind, the participant might do well to consider the following tips in preparing for an assessment center:

- Pace yourself (many participants run out of steam).¹⁴
- "Dress for success" - dark authoritative suits and/or "Class - A" or dress uniform (if appropriate). Shined shoes are a must. Do not wear uniform boots with a suit.¹⁵
- Recognize and correct personal shortcomings in speech habits: overuse of slang/jargon, poor grammar, speaking too softly, mumbling.
- Prepare, memorize, and be able to present a personal career resume.

- Recognize and correct personal shortcomings in writing habits: poor penmanship, poor organization, incorrect spelling of commonly used terms.
- Be able to define or describe currently used "key" words, phrases, and theories in the areas of criminal justice, management, supervision, and finance. Examples: "management by objective," "span of control," "zero based budget," "unity of command," etc.
- Do not become "rattled" or angered by the pressure.

The assessment center participant can expect to undergo intense scrutiny and stress under simulated work-day situations. Before participating in an assessment center, the participant should remember that he's been under stress before... only somewhere else¹⁶

ASSESSMENT CENTER PROBLEMS AND EXERCISES

There are five general categories of assessment center exercises which are commonly used:

1. Oral Presentations
2. In Basket-Exercises
3. Group Exercises
4. Written Exercises
5. Panel Interviews¹⁷

These five categories lend themselves to any number of possible exercises. Indeed, the individual exercises should be "tailored" to meet the needs of the sponsoring agency. The following examples represent just a few of the possible exercises. These examples are a "composite" sampling of exercises - not an intentional reproduction of any previously used exercises.

Oral Presentations

These exercises are used to determine: oral communication skills, creativity, stress tolerance, organization, and salesmanship.

Example: (presentation of credentials)

You have been provided with a posterboard and two, colored markers. You have twenty minutes to prepare a graphic depiction of your resume. When "time" is called, you must stop work. Your name will be called in random order. When it is your "turn", approach the easel and begin a seven to ten

minute "presentation of your credentials."

You are responsible for monitoring your time.

Strategy:

Know yourself - professional and personal strengths and weaknesses. Be straightforward and honest, remembering, you may "fool" one assessor, you can't "fool" all of them".

In-Basket Exercises

These exercises are most common. In-basket is used to demonstrate the candidate's: problem solving skills, decision making, planning, organization, and delegation skills.

Example:

Your Chief is out of town for a five day executive seminar. In his absence, you have been designated as "acting" Chief. On Friday evening (your last day as "acting") at 4:00 p.m., your secretary hands you a stack of thirty documents. Among the documents are various phone messages, business letters, requests, memo's, personnel evaluations etc. Each document requires some action. The documents are numbered. On the sheet provided, you are to prioritize the documents in rank order of importance (one through thirty), and in the space provided describe what action you took on each item. You have forty five minutes to complete this exercise.

Strategy:

Watch the time and pace yourself to finish the exercise. Consider the actions that can be delegated and prepare to verbally justify your actions.

Group Exercises

These exercises are designed to observe the candidate as a participant within the group dynamic. Further, the group exercises demonstrate the participants' sensitivity, flexibility, leadership, interpersonal, and problem solving skills.

Example: (leaderless group)

Your new police building is in the final phase of construction and will be ready for move-in in two weeks. Employee smoking has become a very controversial topic within your agency. The Chief has appointed each of you to this committee and expects you to develop a "smoking" policy for the building and personnel. When you are told to begin, the "committee" will have forty minutes to determine a course of action on the smoking issue.

Strategy:

Participate - be prepared to vigorously support your ideas. Be sensitive to the rest of the group, remembering, that the "loudest" most "aggressive" participant does not usually fare well. Use diplomacy.

Written Exercises

Obviously, these types of exercises are used to test the applicants' writing skills. Logic, organizational ability, and time management are also potential areas of scrutiny.

Example:

Last evening at approximately 11:00 p.m., you were returning home with your family after an evening at the movies. Several blocks from your home, you observed an adult female fleeing from the front of a residence. She is pursued by an adult male who successfully catches her from behind, spins her around and knocks her to the ground with a powerful backhand blow to the face. The female, obviously injured, is able to escape in a vehicle without further assault. As you get closer to the scene, you recognize the male actor as officer "Tommy Temper", one of your subordinates, who was on his regularly scheduled day off at the time of the incident. With the paper provided, you are to write a memo to the Chief describing your actions and recommendations in this matter. You have thirty minutes.

Strategy:

Get to the point. Describe the incident and state your

recommendation in a succinct manner. Avoid misspelling - especially commonly used words. Be realistic - you may be asked to verbally justify your position.

Panel Interviews

Panel interviews are structured to gauge a variety of skills including: oral presentation, stress tolerance, listening, sensitivity, and others.

Example:

Your city recently instituted a curfew which severely restricts the night-time activities of youths under the age of seventeen. After one month of implementation, records indicate that "minority" youths have been detained in approximately eighty three percent of the recorded curfew detentions. The disproportionate number of minority youth detentions have tensions running high. Scattered acts of violence and civil disobedience are becoming more frequent. The local news media has set the stage for a press conference and you have been selected to represent your department as spokesman. When your name is called, you are to approach the podium and face the panel of assessors (who will assume the role of news reporters).

Your "press conference" will be videotaped and last approximately ten minutes. Your fellow participants will not observe your performance and you are not to discuss the "press conference" with the other participants.

Strategy:

"Never let 'em see you sweat." The participant is expected to be nervous - not panicked. Try to make responses sincere and brief (to avoid rambling). Showing anger will not win you points. Never lie in an interview situation.

Related Information

It is difficult for one panel of assessors to effectively assess more than about eight candidates at a time. For this reason, some agencies may find it necessary to establish a screening process in order to limit the number of candidates. The City of North Richland Hills, Texas, for example, requires eligible candidates for promotion to take a pre-assessment written exam. The top eight scores on the written exam entitles those candidates to participate in the assessment center for eventual promotion. Other agencies may opt to convene several assessment center panels or otherwise make arrangements to include more participants.

Ideally, an assessment center will be located away from the workplace. This procedure helps to prevent distractions and enhances the feeling of neutrality.¹⁸ It has been suggested that assessment centers include one assessor for every two participants.¹⁹

ASSESSORS AND SCORING THE PARTICIPANT (see Tables 1 & 2)

In order to help insure an objective, unbiased, and successful assessment center, the selection and training of the assessors is vital. Unbiased objectivity may be difficult to insure if the assessors are drawn from the agency itself. When possible, the assessors should be higher - level managers from outside the agency who have little or no personal knowledge of the candidates. It is equally important that the assessors be trained/experienced in the role of assessor. It is not uncommon for agencies to hire a firm or consultant (who specializes in the field) to conduct or coordinate the assessment center.

As previously indicated, an assessment center is designed to rate a candidate in a number of dimensions including but not limited to:

Professional Knowledge	Creativity
Interpersonal Skills	Stress Tolerance
Writing Skills	Leadership
Verbal Skills	Sensitivity
Analytical Skills	Initiative
Versatility	Planning/Organization
Oral Communication Skill	Judgement ²⁰

As the assessment exercises unfold, each candidate is observed by all assessors who then record their observations on specially designed forms.²¹ After completion of the assessment center exercises, the assessors will convene as a

group to discuss individual observations of each candidate. The group will discuss overall ratings of the candidates to insure that the ratings can be supported by detailed and complete statements of the candidate's performance.²²

CONCLUSION

Assessment centers are a growing, viable and comparatively successful method for selecting or promoting law enforcement personnel. Often, assessment centers will vary in form, content, expense, duration, and purpose.²³

The success of an assessment center participant may well depend on the participant's knowledge of the system and willingness to apply the knowledge in the form of a game plan.

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.²⁴

"Assessment centers serve to select managers of the future."²⁵ Assessment centers are "...as valid or more valid than any other currently used technique."²⁶ Assessment centers "appear to meet EEOC standards more so than the traditional means of paper and pencil tests and/or panel interviews." And finally, "candidates feel it is a fairer process for promotional determinations."²⁷ Given the current climate concerning the use of assessment centers, a "users guide" makes sense as a useful tool for law enforcement personnel.

TABLE 1
ASSESSMENT CENTER SCHEDULE

<u>When</u>	<u>What</u>	<u>Who</u>
7:30 - 8:00 a.m.	Coffee/rolls	Candidates, Assessors
8:00 - 8:15 a.m.	Introductions	Candidates, Assessors
8:15 - 10:00 a.m.	Oral Presentations "Credentials"	Candidates, Assessors
10:10 - 11:00 a.m.	Group Exercise "Leaderless Group"	Candidates, Assessors
11:10 - 12:30 p.m.	Written Exercise "Disciplinary Problem"	Candidates, Assessors
12:30 - 1:30 p.m.	Lunch	Candidates, Assessors
1:45 - 3:00 p.m.	In-Basket Exercise	Candidates, Assessors
3:15 - 4:45 p.m.	Panel Interviews (Final Exercise)	Candidates, Assessors
5:00 - 8:00 p.m.	Tabulating Scores	Assessors

TABLE 2
SAMPLE ASSESSMENT CENTER RATING SHEET

CANDIDATE: _____ DATE: _____

ASSESSORS: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

RATING FOR DIMENSIONS (SKILLS)

- 0 Unsatisfactory candidate
- 1-3. Barely adequate to perform duties
- 4-6. Acceptable (this candidate performs at a level on this dimension which is completely adequate for supervision)
- 7-9. More than acceptable for position sought
- 10. Outstanding candidate

	WRITTEN EXERCISE	GROUP EXERCISE	ORAL PRESENT- ATION	PANEL INTER- VIEW	IN-BASKET
JUDGEMENT.....	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
PLANNING/ ORGANIZATION..	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
LEADERSHIP....	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
SENSITIVITY TO PEOPLE.....	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
FLEXIBILITY...	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
ORAL COMMUNICATION.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
TOLERANCE FOR STRESS....	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
DECISIVENESS..	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
INDEPENDENCE..	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
WRITTEN SKILLS.....	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
AVERAGE.....	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

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² Anderson, Ralph and Associates, Training And Staff Development. Dallas: Ralph Anderson and Associates, 1988. I-3.

³ Brown, Gary E., "What You Always Wanted To Know About Assessment Centers But Were Afraid To Ask." The Police Chief, (June 1978): 60.

⁴ Ibid. 61.

⁵ Mr. James S. Kline, interview by author, Arlington, Texas, August 1991.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Klimoski, Richard J., and William J. Strickland. "Assessment Centers - Valid or Merely Prescient." Personnel Psychology 30 (1977): 351.

⁸ Ibid. 351.

⁹ Sackett, Paul R., "A Critical Look at Some Common Beliefs About Assessment Centers." Public Personnel Management (Summer 1982): n.p.

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