



Top Dozen Tips for Designing Assessment Centres

Free yourself of the “Centre” mentality

Think process. Work through the following steps, then decide whether a *physical* centre, with all the associated cost and logistical complications, is actually needed.

Start with the end in mind

Be clear about *why* you want to carry out the assessments, and *what* you are going to do with the conclusions and outputs. These are the first questions people will ask, and the answers will influence the design.

Give as much attention to planning the end to end process as designing the assessment method

Visualise the whole process, from inviting participants (or nominations), to giving feedback to the organisation and individuals, to how decisions are going to be made and any next steps implemented (e.g. development planning, induction processes). In particular, think communication, communication, communication – who needs to know what when?

Set a budget

There are endless ways of finessing an assessment centre to provide additional insights, but at additional effort and cost. Having at least a ballpark cost per candidate/participant will focus the mind.

Be clear about the key design criteria

These are the boxes that must be ticked by the design. For example, what time commitment will the organisation and participants think reasonable? Are there any *real* deadlines that need to be met? Are any

assessment methods so counter cultural that they would be counterproductive? Does the level of the candidates preclude or require specific assessment methods? Will line management need to be part of the assessment process or will an expert-delivered process be more suitable?

Resist the temptation to throw in every kind of activity or follow a set formula

We have been in too many design meetings which start “We need a role play, two group exercises, three cognitive tests....”. Aim to use the minimum number of assessment methods that will give you the insights you need and give you most “bang for your bucks”. The 80/20 rule applies – whilst more than one data source is useful, beyond a certain point the more activities you include, the greater the complexity, the higher the margin for error in delivery, the greater the cost, and the proportionately less the benefit i.e. the Law of Diminishing Returns applies.

Consider a pre-screening, or self-selection process

We cannot tell you how many times we have heard complaints from participants such as: “I don’t know why I’m on this – I don’t want to move up to the next level anyway”. It is a waste of money and everyone’s time to assess people for whom the purpose of the assessment process is irrelevant, or for whom the timing is wrong.

Think very carefully about role plays and group exercises

At their best, and with the right level of participants, they can provide great insights about interpersonal style and confidence. However we have seen too many that simply weren’t worth the effort, either because they were badly conceived or the participants didn’t play ball. At worst, they can even damage the credibility of the whole process in the eyes of the participants.

If possible incorporate a 180/360 feedback gathering process as part of the assessment

Obviously this is difficult to do for external candidates beyond the referencing procedure, but worth the effort (if well done) for internal participants. It also provides you with something you can feed back to participants immediately and potentially something they can take away with them at the end of an assessment centre, thereby providing a sense of immediate value add for participants.

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Plan the logistics, administration and quality assurance with military precision

There is nothing guaranteed to undermine the credibility of an assessment process as much as logistical and administrative mistakes. Make sure everyone involved knows clearly what they are and are not accountable for. No shared (i.e. ambiguous) responsibilities!

Get the best team you can

Assessing people is about individual careers and organisational futures. You want a team that will approach the job with the integrity, expertise and attention to detail that it deserves. If using an external organisation, do not put so much pressure on the capacity of the organisation that they have to use people they are less sure about. Be willing to flex the parameters (timescales for example) to ensure you have the right team. If there are two or three small organisations you trust, think about using each one to do the bits they're good at (perhaps with one of them taking overall responsibility). Also, decide what you want your own people or line managers to be involved in.

Treat the job of leading and motivating the assessment team as a key part of the process

Conducting in depth assessments is intellectually and emotionally demanding – if an assessor is not fresh and motivated, they will not be able to do the best job. Aim to create a 'one team' ethos rather than preserve a 'supplier/client' distance. If choosing a traditional assessment centre approach do not make the days too long, and do not ask participants or assessors to get up at 5am for a 9am start on the other side of the country. Not only will the concentration of assessors wain, but participants will get tired and struggle to give of their best.

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