

Building solid assessment foundations

In the second part of a series of workshops, Ali Gill of Getfeedback explains why skimping on a robust talent assessment for your organisation can be a false economy.



Accurately assessing your people or a new candidate against your role profile enables you to make the links between that person, the role, the team and the organisation. Assessment is the foundation upon which the entire talent lifecycle process rests: it throws light on the talent landscape, giving you an idea where your people currently stand and how this relates to your vision of the high performance teams that will deliver the business strategy. Without these two concepts being firmly defined, the process of talent management becomes less about science and strategy and more about pot luck.

To give you that firm bedrock for the whole talent lifecycle – the selection, performance, development, and promotion processes – it is worth investing in robust assessment. Skimping at this defining stage is a false economy – many of the assessment frameworks we see are often numerous and not joined up, over complex and/or unfinished resulting in mounting costs as time and again the wrong person is put in the job.

Accurate assessment makes tough HR decisions easier and helps to provide reassurance when you have found the right person. As business investment decisions become less

focused on capital investment and more focused on finding and leveraging people, managers should expect the same quality investment decision-making processes that would go into procuring machinery, with hard metrics and risks identified. Get the decision-making criteria tightly defined and assessment becomes a value-adding exercise and not a tick in the box.

The importance of assessment can be illustrated by the mantra, 'if you can measure it you can manage it'. Without creating some sort of measurement framework how can you make informed decisions? You wouldn't build on quicksand that will give way under any sort of pressure, the same should apply to the people within the business – robust assessment provides the solid grounding for the rest of the employee talent lifecycle.

Accurate assessment is an investment however, and as with all business investments, you have to compromise on time and cost to achieve greater quality. In this case quality means the right level of accuracy, objectivity and fairness to ensure your assessment enables greater business performance and justifies the cost and time investment.

Being clear about the assessment process is essential. Frequently HR



leaders are not clear on why they use a particular process. It may be 'because the CEO wanted us to', or 'we used that methodology because that's how it's always been done', or 'that idea is in fashion in HR right now'. You have to ask yourself if it is intelligent reasoning and what can be done to step back and objectively assess the process.

If robust assessment all sounds too conceptual or idealistic be assured that once assessment is used to identify where your organisation is against its own definition of 'good', you will be able to make better practical decisions; for example, which management development programme to implement, which managers need better performance management training, which COO candidate will fit your organisation best, or how can I fill the less attractive but essential roles.

Know the whole person

If you were buying a company, you'd have due diligence in checking all possible aspects of that company and you would use the resources necessary to make sure the process was done properly. Assessment is a similar process on a smaller scale. Before 'acquiring' an employee for a new position, you should make the appropriate evaluations and use the appropriate resources to do so.

We recommend that in order to get the most out of assessment, organisations place the emphasis on a behavioural approach. Without becoming too technical, this approach looks at the things that can be observed about a person, not just their experience (technical competency) or personality (traits) but what they actually *do* at work. This approach is extremely well documented and grounded in extensive academic research from real organisations.

Know what you are looking for

Central to filling a role with the right person are the questions of exactly

what are you looking for, and how will you be sure that you have found it? This involves profiling the role accurately, resulting in a standard around which to build your assessment framework. This can be used to measure individuals' 'fit' with the role. This serves two purposes: it provides a filter through which to pass candidates and enables the business to more effectively manage the candidate in the workplace.

Create a sensible behavioural framework as your clear selection criteria and you will save time, energy and, very often, money by preventing mistakes. Remember that it is easy to get mixed up, for example, saying that the ideal candidate needs to have five years' in the relevant sector (experience); be emotionally resilient (personality trait) and demonstrate good leadership skills (behaviour). Be clear about the distinction of such elements – look at them in isolation and combination. Work with someone who is a specialist in the role to brainstorm key tasks then break these down into smaller parts and identify the behaviours that would need to be demonstrated to achieve those tasks.

Why the behavioural approach?

The advantage of looking at behaviour is that once defined in your organisation's own language, a framework of behaviours differentiating between competence and high performance remains durable, even as your business changes over time. This approach is applicable across functional divides, or specific roles where the emphasis or blend of strengths required changes but not the underlying structure of the whole framework.

Another advantage of behaviour as a differentiator between people is that despite it being a manifestation of more fixed attributes such as personality traits, skills, experience and motives, behaviour can also be learned. For example, even if you are uncomfortable presenting to a

Performance Factors	Poor	Good	Excellent
Quality of Work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quantity of Work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Initiative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adaptability / Versatility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cooperation/Relations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dependability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supervision / Leadership Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Factor % = Performance Level number x rating
Add ratings for all eight factors to determine overall rating for work function

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large audience you can still learn to deliver an engaging presentation with visual aids, eye contact, analogy and humour. Using a behavioural approach gives you insights into the development actions you will need to take if you decide to employ an individual.

Behaviour is accurately measured by trained individuals by observing, recording and evaluating specific behaviour. Techniques can include:

- Behavioural event interviewing – asking a candidate what they did during the implementation of a successful and challenging project, asking skilful questions to elicit behavioural descriptions.
- Work-based observation – using a trained assessor to shadow an individual at work to observe precisely what they do in day-to-day scenarios relevant to their role.
- Assessment and development centres – combine any number of discrete exercises such as written exercises, role plays, presentations, or competitive and collaborative group exercises.

At Getfeedback we underpin our assessment work with the Schroder framework because it is based on a wide breadth of research from different industries and sectors. It is very robust scientifically because of this and it measures performance as judged by organisational output.

We look at four clusters of behaviour that form Schroder's generic framework:

- *Thinking* behaviours are seeking information, forming concepts and conceptual agility.
- *Inspirational* behaviours are influence, building confidence and inspiring communication.
- *Involving* behaviours are enabling openness, facilitating teamwork and developing capability.
- *Performance* behaviours are

empowering action and measuring and monitoring performance.

This approach has the advantage of the cost-effective creation of a workable, validated, benchmarked behavioural framework with behaviours written in the language of your organisation and incorporating your own values. This helps everyone in the organisation relate to the framework, as well as it being robust and accurate and a great tool to underpin all further work.

Building a fuller picture

Alongside behavioural assessment we recommend looking at the other three major facets that can be used to flesh out the picture: ability, motivation and personality. Using online psychometrics provides a cost-effective, slick and potentially branded candidate experience that quickly builds a fuller picture.

Ability

The importance of cognitive ability – raw intellectual horsepower – cannot be underestimated. It is measured by looking at people's numerical and verbal reasoning usually through low-cost psychometric tests. In simple terms there is greater correlation between cognitive ability and performance the higher up an organisational hierarchy an individual goes. Identifying the intellect to deal with complexity also gives a firm indication of potential to overlay on performance measures. Always use such measures in conjunction with the other information available to you – by layering different types of assessment you are creating a richer picture and will make broad-based decisions. Of course you don't need to be the archetypal rocket scientist for all roles, just be mindful of where someone's career path may take them and how equipped they'll be to perform down the line.

Motivation

Imagine the situation where you have someone at a senior level who has a



big brain; strong reasoning abilities; demonstrates sophisticated behaviours that get the best out of people around them and essentially looks like they would do a fantastic job in the role you are selecting – for example, a financial controller. Look at their motivation for the job. Say this candidate currently works in your M&A strategy team and thrives on variety, pressure and taking responsibility for bold recommendations. They do not really care about detail, process and delegation. They will get easily bored in this role and not perform to the best of their ability. How often do you hear someone looked good on paper but haven't delivered? Well, get a clear view of what people 'will do' on paper in the first place, alongside 'what they can do'. A good motivational profile informs the difficult questions you can ask to really see how they would cope with the realities of the role. The business benefits are multiple and straightforward: the right people in the right jobs, a higher energy workplace and career paths mapped out that compel your talent to stay.

Personality

People have clear preferences about the roles, tasks, and relationships they are comfortable with at work, depending on their personality types. Our personality is a significant part of who we are. You may not want someone who is essentially detail oriented to be the new director of strategy. They might however play a vital desk-based research role pulling together information for the strategy director. If your culture is all about conformity and controlled process and your best candidate sees themselves as a maverick innovator be prepared for a culture clash.

So, it is the trio you need to consider alongside your behavioural assessment when evaluating on an individual basis. Get the ability and

motivation right and you could still have problems unless you consider natural personality too. Once you have done all this, you can then take the results in conjunction with that person's behavioural competence and experience to ask more focused questions of individuals (remember people will nearly always claim it is the job for them) and make more informed decisions. You could even refer them to a trained occupational psychologist to extract the greatest value from these assessments as they will identify the key linkages and themes.

Accuracy

For the assessment process to truly work and to be adopted by all levels of the organisation, your frameworks must be robust: accurate, valid, consistent and thorough, inspiring faith and confidence in those using them. Assessment methodology should reflect the language and feel of your organisation to create trust, which in turn will give credibility to your recruitment decisions.

Inconsistent or less than thorough execution means people at all levels will lose faith in the processes. It is the classic situation of only being as strong as your weakest link.

Economy in time, energy or resources at the beginning of the process when designing assessment programmes will hijack the whole process in the long run. Build solid assessment foundations and you will justify your investment through effective selection and promotion decisions, and well-targeted development spend. One final word, never forget to give individuals constructive feedback on their performance. It is their return for their time and energy input to the assessment process and links to the next workshop.

In our next workshop we will look at talent development and engagement. ■



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