

Recruitment and selection – making the right choices



As the business climate becomes ever tougher, having the right people is a business imperative. Good training and development practices will help develop the people you already have in your business, but recruitment presents the ideal opportunity to bring the right people in from the start.

Effective selection is about treating recruitment decisions as business decisions. As with all business decisions there are elements of cost and risk, but the payback of getting it right is high. Selecting the wrong person can have all sorts of repercussions - unhappy customers, unhappy fellow employees - and, could lose you business as a result. Whereas, the right person could open up opportunities that never before existed. They will certainly cause you less stress! It is also important to note that selection is not just about filling a new role from outside your company, it can also be about promoting from within. The principles of how you make these decisions, however, are still the same.

In most organisations, if “Fred” leaves we will try to find someone as a replacement to carry out his or her tasks. Fair enough, but imagine if Fred’s replacement (Fred Jr?!) was capable of much more than Fred? Better at making decisions, made fewer mistakes, better at interacting with customers and with other employees, more willing, absent less often (or never?), worked after 5.00pm to complete an important job etc etc...? “Great!”, you might say, but the challenge is how do we identify Fred Jr?

At this point let’s draw a distinction between recruitment and selection. If all we want to do is hire someone to do the *tasks* Fred did then the process is quite straightforward – all we need to know about candidates is do they have the appropriate skills or knowledge to do those specific tasks. This is recruitment at its most basic. However, if we want to use Fred’s departure (or the creation of a new position) as an opportunity to bring in some additional *talent* to the business we need to start thinking a bit more deeply about what qualities we think we need and how we are going to measure them. This is selection and is a much more scientific process than recruitment. It takes more time and is harder, but the impact of getting it right is significantly greater.

What does the ideal candidate look like?

As with all business decisions we need to understand what we are trying to achieve before we can work out how to assess it and then make the decision on which option best fits the bill. A simple way to think of the criteria people need to possess to be effective in a job is to think about the following four areas :

Knowledge – what does someone need to know to be able do the job. E.g. a solicitor needs to *know* what to do when asked to handle a house sale/purchase.

Skill – what are the specific skills that someone needs to be able to display to do the job? E.g. a lorry driver needs to be *able* to manoeuvre a truck (which is different to manoeuvring a car).

Attitude – much harder to assess as attitudes are internal to us. We can only make judgements on attitude based on what people say and do and how they say and do it. As an example we might expect a receptionist to *display* a friendly and helpful attitude, but what we would actually see would be a smile, good eye contact, quick acknowledgement of the visitor etc.

Behaviour – in what way does someone need to *behave* to be effective in the job. For example Traffic Wardens need to display the ability to handle angry members of the public, Managers need to be able to provide their employees with feedback in an objective, constructive way.

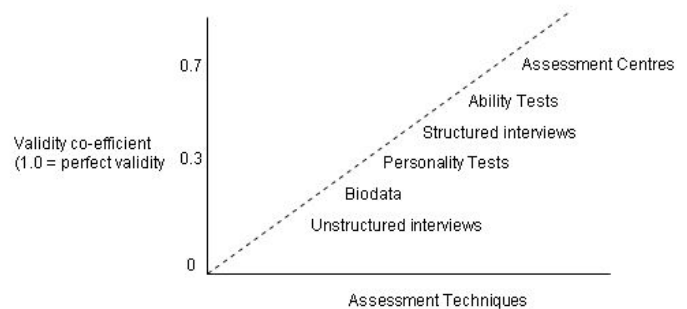
Analysing what behaviours are required for someone to perform well in a job can be a complex task. In essence it involves analysing what your best people do differently to your not so strong people. The situation can be made slightly simpler if we assume that our attitudes affect our behaviours, but the real trick to making sound assessment decisions is to focus on observable behaviour rather than trying to make interpretations of what we think that behaviour means – we are in no position to state the reasons why someone did what they did, we can only observe what they actually did.

Once we have some idea of what we are looking for across these four dimensions, we can then start to be a bit more specific by deciding which of these aspects are essential to do the job versus nice-to-haves. The really tricky part is then working out how to measure each of these criteria. Knowledge can be assessed fairly easily by asking questions – someone will either know the answers or not. Skill is also fairly easy to assess as someone could demonstrate their ability through an appropriate test (e.g. driving test or typing test). Attitude and behaviour however are much harder to assess, yet these can significantly impact how good someone is in a job - would you rather have someone who could technically do a job, but caused you significant frustration because of their attitude and behaviour or someone who was not quite up to speed with regard to being able to do the job, but had an overwhelming desire to learn and be positive?

Selection techniques

Much research has been carried out on the effectiveness of various selection techniques. The diagram below shows the predictive validity (i.e. the measure of certainty of the person being able to perform in the job) of some common selection processes.

This research shows that the traditional (unstructured) interview is a poor predictor of future performance. The use of more structured assessment techniques results in much higher predictability. This research also finds that when these techniques are combined the predictive validity is even higher. Although no technique is a perfect predictor of future success there are things that can be done to maximise the effectiveness of or selection process.



Interviews

Most of you will have conducted an interview at some point in your careers. It is probably the most common form of selection technique. During a typical interview the interviewer asks the candidate a series of questions in an attempt to make a judgement on the candidate's personality and abilities. There are specific skills which make the process of interviewing more effective, but these are beyond the remit of this article (if you have never received interview skills training we would advise you investigate some).

The main problem with interviews is the amount of inherent bias in the process, essentially caused by the interviewer's need (and desire) to make judgements on the interviewee. Structured interviews are better. They remove some of this bias as they require that each candidate be asked the same set of questions and that the interviewer asks questions in a way that gets the interviewee to describe what they have specifically achieved in previous situations and how they actually did it rather than asking questions about what the candidate *would* do in a hypothetical situation. The responses to these questions are then rated against our set of criteria.

Assessment Centres

Assessment centres are more involved than interviews typically lasting anything from half a day to two or even three days. They use a variety of exercises and tests which are designed to assess each candidate against the criteria we have defined. Due to their nature assessment centres are complex and expensive to put in place. The benefits are their higher predictive validity and, where there are large numbers of candidates involved they become more cost-effective.

Psychometric tests

These fall into two broad camps – personality tests and ability tests. There are many personality tests available, some well-researched some less so. It is very difficult to assess whether someone has the "right" personality. As such personality tests do not provide a "score". Instead they provide an indication of someone's preferred style. In addition to personality there are also some good

products that provide an indication of leadership style etc. All these tools need to be treated with some caution as they usually rely on the candidate's own responses to the assessment.

Ability tests are much more specific in being able to measure someone's ability to carry out a task. Examples would include numerical ability tests or verbal reasoning tests. They measure how good someone is at a particular task, skill or way of thinking and they often provide a measure of how someone's score compares to other people who have completed the same test.

Selection tool	Pros	Cons
Interviews	Candidates feel they have been able to give their best shot Interviewer feels comfortable about assessing "chemistry"	Unreliable predictor of actual ability Can contain bias leading to claims of discrimination or unfairness
Structured interviews	Allow more accurate comparison of candidates Fairer than unstructured interviews	Unless criteria are clearly defined they may assess the wrong thing Requires a higher level of interviewing skill
Assessment Centres	Much more accurate as they use multiple assessment methods to assess criteria Eliminates interviewer bias as often involve multiple assessors	More time intensive and therefore expensive Can overwhelm some candidates Assessors require training in specific skills to be effective
Personality tests	Provide a reliable interpretation of a candidate's preferred style Useful when used in conjunction with an interview Useful where personality factors are important to job success e.g. sales	The best tests require training and accreditation to use Profile relies on the candidate's own responses
Ability tests	Accurately measure specific skills or abilities	The best tests require training and accreditation to use Due to their nature they only measure very specific things

Table 1 – comparing the various selection tools

Which approach is best for your business?

Clearly the combination of some of these techniques is very powerful, but which approach is best for you. Well, as with all these things it depends. If you are looking to recruit a large number of people into one type of position that requires specific skills and abilities then an assessment centre might be the best option for you. The assessment centre is also a good method for selecting for management positions as the cost of getting it wrong outweighs the cost of putting together the assessment centre. If you are looking to recruit for a position of relatively low level skill and ability then maybe just improving your interview technique is all that is required.

In all cases, considering doing some individual assessment with the use of personality or ability tests in conjunction with a structured interview would significantly increase your confidence in making the right

selection decision. Using psychometric tests in addition to the interview adds a lot more objectivity to the process whilst not being as costly or time consuming as a full blown assessment centre.

The decision

Once you are clear on the criteria your ideal employee needs to possess to be successful you can then apply the most appropriate selection tool to each of your candidates and I guarantee the right candidate will stand out from the crowd.

However, at the end of the exercise you still have to work with the person you recruit so there does need to be an element of personal relationship between you. Tests can never solely be relied on to make the decision for you, They are just one more tool that you can apply to help you make even better decisions for your business.