

Identifying high potential police officers and role characteristics

Jan Francis-Smythe , Gordon Tinline & Chris Allender

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Background

Robertson Cooper Ltd (RCL) was commissioned in April 2000 by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to carry out a psychometric assessment validation study as part of a Career Pathways Project. The objective (Objective A) was to determine whether psychometric assessment could be used as a decision-making aid in helping police officers best determine their future career direction. This was based on the notion that whilst there are numerous differing roles within the Police service they can generally be clustered into a few generic role families (e.g. tactical (front line policing), community (the 'beat bobby'), intelligence (analysis and interpretation of data), investigative (probing enquiries) and support (administrative)). Given that the nature of the tasks to be completed in these role families differs the project set out to assess the extent to which a police officer's personal characteristics (e.g. personality, motivation, ability) might predict which role family they were most suited to as measured by performance level, well-being and attachment to the organisation. A number of technical problems prevented the project proceeding to completion with respect to the identification of best predictors for suitability to specific role families. However, analyses did permit the derivation of draft generic role family 'profiles'. The objective of the project then moved to exploring, at a more general level, the potential role of psychometric assessment in the identification of high potential police officers (Objective B).

Objective A

The notion of an interplay between a person and the environment is the basis of interactionism which underlies much of the past research in work motivation (Hackman & Oldham,1980; Lee, Locke & Latham,1989), job satisfaction (Dawis & Lofquist,1984), job stress (French, Caplan & Harrison,1982) and vocational choice (Holland,1985). The central tenet of much of this work, known as P-E (person-environment) fit theory, is that a 'fit' or 'match' between the person and the situation will produce positive outcomes, whereas a 'mis-match' will produce negative outcomes. Many aspects of fit have been considered ranging from whether the person's ability or personality suits the environmental demands to whether the person's desires/needs are met by the environmental supplies (Edwards,1991). Similarly, the effects of fit on a number of outcomes have been considered; evidence for P-J fit effects have been shown across widely different occupations (Harrison,1978), different age groups (Kahana, Liang & Felton,1980) and in different countries (Tannenbaum & Kuleck,1978). In general, Edwards (1991) concludes (a) fit (as represented by desires/supplies) has been shown to be positively related to job satisfaction, (b) the results with performance have been equivocal, (c) negative relationships have been shown to exist with absenteeism, turnover and resentment and (d) positive relationships have been shown to exist with job involvement, commitment, trust and well-being. The notion to be explored here was that

'fit' between police officer and job-role family would result in positive outcomes (i.e. enhanced performance, well-being, satisfaction and attachment).

Objective B:

Under current selection practices high potential police officers represent the police 'leaders' of the future. Whilst the 1950s 'trait approach' to leadership appeared to not be well empirically supported, more recent work, particularly meta-analyses, suggest that there are a number of personal characteristics indicative of leadership potential which are stable across a range of different types of organisation (Fiedler & House,1994). These are proposed to include: initiative, flexibility, adaptability, sound and timely decision-making, capacity to motivate (Bower,1996); extroversion, openness to experience, cognitive ability (Kickul,2000); self-confidence, honesty, integrity, drive and persistence, cognitive ability, (Kirkpatrick and Locke,1991); dominance, extroversion, intelligence (Lord et.al,1986); a high need for power and achievement (McClelland & Boyatzis,1982) and charisma, dominance, energy, (Youngjohn,2000). Additionally, recent research (Chemers, 2000) has provided evidence to support supervisory leadership potential ratings as good predictors of later observed leadership performance.

Design

The Project Manager at the MPS was responsible for seeking nominations of officers to take part in the study from Supervisors across the whole of the MPS. Supervisors were advised officers would need to attend a testing session at a specified location and that the supervisor, would be required to complete a performance rating scale measuring the leadership potential of the officer. Based on an extensive review of the literature and the technical properties of a number of psychometric measures, a broad psychometric assessment battery was constructed comprising measures of personality, ability and motivation. Each measure selected was chosen on the basis of a priori hypotheses concerning the relationship between each of the scales in the measure and at least one of the outcome variables (performance, well-being and attachment) with an emphasis on measures which would potentially maximise differentiation between role families.

Methods

Two hundred and twenty five (225) Police officers attended the testing sessions being briefed in advance as to the purpose of the assessments. The sessions lasted approximately 3 hours, were conducted in groups of 6-10 and carried out by the Consultants. The following assessments were carried out:

GAT2 – an assessment of general cognitive ability (ASE)

OPQ32 – 32 scale personality assessment (SHL)

Advanced Career Interest Inventory – assesses interest in activities from skilled and supervisory levels to professional and managerial (SHL)

Motivational Styles Questionnaire- assesses the direction and way in which a person will most willingly exert effort at work through needs and goals (Psychological Corporation)

Innovation Potential Indicator – assesses potential for innovation at work (OPP) through 4 scales: Motivation to Change (persistence and ambition, $\alpha = 0.70$), Challenging Behaviour (actively engaging and challenging others’ points of view in order to solve problems at work, $\alpha = 0.71$), Adaptation (incremental change to tried and tested methods, $\alpha = 0.70$), Consistency of Work styles (consistent and methodical approach to work and problem-solving, $\alpha = 0.73$).

Time Personality Indicator (Francis-Smythe & Robertson, 1999a) – assesses personality in relation to use of and attitude to time through 5 scales : Time Awareness (relates to actual time and how time is spent - high score = very aware, $\alpha = 0.77$), Punctuality (attitude to 'being on time' - high score = very punctual, $\alpha = 0.71$), Planning (attitude towards planning and sequencing of tasks in advance - high score = forward planner, $\alpha = 0.70$), Polychronicity (preference for doing more than one thing at a time -high score = highly polychronic, $\alpha = 0.63$) and Impatience (a tendency to want to complete a task quickly - high score =very impatient, $\alpha = 0.65$).

Leadership potential (self and supervisor rating) –The 5 item 7 point scale assesses potential to advance in the MPS.

The Leadership Potential rating completed by the supervisor was distributed and returned by post. Each Officer was assigned to a role family based on the knowledge and experience of the role by the Project Manager.

Results

The sample used for analysis was all assessed Officers with available supervisor performance ratings (N=184). Table 1. shows demographic breakdown of the sample by rank, ethnic origin and qualification level. The sample was 83% male, mean age 39 (range 24 to 57), mean length of MPS service 8 years (range 1 to 37), average time in current post 2.6 years with 70% of sample between 1 and 6 years.

Table 1. Demographics of sample

<i>Rank</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Qualification</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Constable	89	48	White	159	86	None	8	4
Sergeant	53	29	Asian	8	4	GCSE	67	36
Insp/Chief Inspector	35	19	Black	10	6	A level	52	28
Other	7	4	Other	7	4	Degree	50	27
						Other	7	4

Objective A

The allocation of officers to role families resulted in the following distribution : Tactical =43, Investigative = 34, Community = 28, Intelligence = 14, Support = 26.

Cognitive ability: there were no significant differences between role families.

Personality, motivation and career interests:

Table 2. compares characteristics across role families showing the Highest and Lowest scoring role family in each instance where there is a statistically significant difference between families. The Support role family appeared most different from the rest but this may be an unreliable finding given the lack of commonality across job roles within this family.

Objective B

Table 3. shows the Pearson correlations between each of the assessment predictor scales and the supervisor ratings of leadership potential.

Correlation between self and supervisor ratings of potential to advance were generally high (as high as .68 for the item “seems likely to rise higher in the MPS).

Table 2. Characteristics by role family

	Tactical	Investigative	Community	Intelligence	Support
OPQ					
Affiliative			Least		Most
Detail conscious			Least		Most
Competitive			Least		Most
Emotionally controlled			Least		Most
Tough minded			Least		Most
Worrying				Most	Least
Relaxed	Least				Most
Innovative	Least				Most
Socially confident				Least	Most
Persausive	Least				Most
Caring			Most	Least	
Conventional	Most		Least		
Optimistic	Least				Most
Data rational	Most			Least	
TPI					
Polychronicity	Least			Most	
Impatience	Most		Least		
MSQ			Highest		Lowest
Need for structure					
AOII		Most	Least		
Information and Research work					
Education work			Most		Least
Legal work		Most			Least
Welfare work			Most	Least	
Control work	Most			Least	
Admin work			Most	Least	
	Tactical	Investigative	Community	Intelligence	Support

OPQ Occupational personality Questionnaire; TPI Time Personality Indicator; MSQ Motivation Styles Questionnaire; AOII Advanced Interest Inventory

Table 3. Significant Pearson Correlations between the assessment predictor scales and the supervisor rating of leadership potential.

GAT2	0.30**				
OPQ					
Variety seeking	0.35**	Conventional	-0.22*	Decisive	0.18*
Controlling	0.27**	Modest	-0.21*	Rule following	-0.13*
Achieving	0.24*	Vigorous	0.21*	Behavioural	0.13*
		Optimistic	0.19*	Conscientious	-0.13*
IPI					
Motivation to change	0.37**	Adaptation	-0.18**		
Challenging behaviour	0.20**	Consistency work style	-0.23**		
MSQ					
Achievement	0.18**	Structure	-0.33**		
Personal power	0.18*	General orientation	0.17*		
TPI					
Punctuality	0.19*	Impatience	0.25*		

* p<0.05; **p<0.001

Conclusions

Role family differences.

The results indicate there were real differences in personality and motivational characteristics between the different role family assigned groups. In particular, the Support role family composition seemed to substantially differ in terms of predominant characteristics to other role family groups. The distinction between the other four role family groups was less clear, but there were some differences, most notably, there were marked differences between the groups on the career interest scales, as hypothesised. These results are encouraging in terms of supporting the notion that different role families do exist within the Police service where certain jobs can be grouped together in terms of the demands they place on officers and thus the personal characteristics most suited to meeting these demands. However, there are three main limitations to these findings: firstly, they are based on ‘officer assigned’ job role categorisations, not on actual job characteristics and secondly, the Support role which was responsible for the major significant differences is in fact a very mixed bag of job roles which would be difficult to define in terms of common job characteristics and thirdly, it only tells us the characteristics of the officers actually in the role families now, these may not be the ‘most suited’ ones. This research has shown however that a follow-up study focusing on police jobs that can be allocated to role families on the basis of well defined job characteristics (as assessed by a panel of reviewers), across more than one Force, would be a useful next step in exploring the notion of Police Career Pathways further. A further project such as this could then utilise the performance, well-being and attachment data to begin to address the third limitation cited above and establish the extent to which the officers in these families were actually ‘best suited’.

The high potential police officer.

Through the use of a wide-ranging battery of psychological assessments this research has allowed us to draw a number of conclusions about the characteristics of a ‘high potential police officer’. Typically, these are:

- ◆ High cognitive ability
- ◆ Seeking variety and change in work
- ◆ A low need for affiliation, high independence
- ◆ A general desire to control and lead
- ◆ A desire to complete tasks and jobs quickly and to hurry things along
- ◆ High need for achievement
- ◆ Thrives on lots of activity
- ◆ Ambitious and career-centred
- ◆ Prepared to talk about achievements and self-promote
- ◆ A willingness to challenge others and the status quo
- ◆ A low need for structure and preference for a flexible work environment
- ◆ A tendency to value punctuality
- ◆ Optimistic outlook
- ◆ Prepared to make quick decisions
- ◆ A tendency to use power and influence over systems and people

As can be seen these characteristics are very similar to those cited in the literature as per the introductory paragraph. Leadership characteristics within the police service appear therefore to be similar to other organisations. Additionally, the high correlation between self and supervisor ratings of high potential suggests these characteristics are clearly articulated and communicated, those who have them are aware of their potential.

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