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The Assessment Center is a relatively new method for personnel selection that becomes more and more popular among the Human Resources Managers. It has proven to have efficiency both in personnel selection and training needs identification. This paper refers mainly to the assessment center in personnel selection, describing the entire process of creating and implementing an Assessment Center. The case study presented in this paper emphasizes the importance and the efficiency of this method in choosing the right candidates for the Key Account Manager position.

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Introduction

There are various methods used by the companies for personnel selection, in the process of attracting the best candidates for their job openings. The Assessment Center is one of the most efficient methods in this area. During the traditional personnel selection process, the person who is making the interviews can gather much information in regards to the candidate. Nevertheless, almost any candidate who has some experience in participating in a job interview can prepare his/her answers in advance and can simulate the optimal behavior expected during the interview. Especially for these cases, it is recommended to use the Assessment Center. More over, the Assessment Centers are used when there is more than one candidate that suits perfectly the job profile and the hiring company would like to offer a chance to each one of them. Also, there are cases when the manager is hesitating or let's say he/she is not decided between two or more candidates fitting the job profile. In any case, this method is recommended **for the middle management positions, top management positions, specialized positions or positions that require a permanent communication with clients or business partners.**

The Assessment Center is a method of selection which is utilizing a wide range of evaluation techniques and it usually has the following characteristics:

- The focus in on the behavior
- It uses exercises for representing and simulating the essential dimensions of the job, like role -plays for 2 persons or group exercises. It is assumed that a high performance during these simulations is predicting and anticipating a high performance on the new job.
- Besides the group exercises, there are interviews and tests completing the recruitment process.
- During the assessment center the performance is measured from many angles, in terms of necessary competencies for reaching the expected level of performance on a certain activity or at a certain level of the organization.
- The evaluations of the candidates or participants is done by putting them together, in order to permit the interaction between them and for making the experience more open and participative;
- A large number of evaluators or observers are used, in order to have a high objectivity level of the evaluation. It is recommended to use superior managers of the organization, to have the guarantee that they take „ownership” and are very responsible during the evaluation process. The evaluators must be chosen very carefully.

The Assessment Centers offer very good opportunities of finding how compatible are the candidates with the organizational culture. This is established by observing their behavior in different, but representative situations and also by the results on the various tests and interviews which are part of the procedure. Plus, the Assessment Centers offer to the candidates the possibility of making a clearer image in regards to the organization and its values, so finally they can decide themselves if they will integrate or not and if they will succeed or not.

An Assessment Center well organized can definitely reach a better predictability of the performance level and the future progress of the candidate, in comparison with the appreciations made by the regular methods, by the middle/top managers and even HR Managers interviews.

Broad and limited definition of the assessment center. Concept limitations.

Limited definition: the Assessment Centers mean simulation exercises.

Broad definition: the Assessment Centers mean simulation exercises, personality tests, skills' tests, interviews.

Concept limitations:

- The Assessment Center is a standardized evaluation process of a set of behaviors.
- It utilizes a minimum of two simulation exercises of relevant job related situations
- It involves many observers who record and evaluate the behaviors

The basic principles of the Assessment Centers

- The Assessment Centers' use concerns the evaluation of measurable and observable behaviors
- The candidates are requested to demonstrate that they really know to do things as good as they claim
- The activities included in the Assessment Center must simulate and not reproduce relevant situations for a certain job

- It is necessary to inform all participants in regards to what is an Assessment Center
- It is necessary that the direct manager or a person who is not higher than two levels up the position to participate in the Assessment Center as assessor.

The first thing in organizing a successful Assessment Centers is to define the necessary behaviors for a certain job profile of a certain position within a company. The Assessment Center can be basically designed based on this first information.

The next step is to establish the date, the place and the duration of the assessment process. Generally, the Assessment Centers are organized at the end of the week, because most of the participants cannot take part in it during their working days in their present jobs. Every candidate must be informed before hand in regards to the event and to the entire process. In regards to the location, it is best to organize the Assessment Center in a neutral location – Business Centers or hotels' conference rooms, for example.

After all the assessment processes take place, the participants must be informed in regards to the results. This is done by meeting with the company consultants or by written reports.

The competencies of the Assessment Center

The competencies are sets of behaviors that are relevant for obtaining the performance on a certain job. In the Assessment Centers that has the personnel selection as main priority, the competencies are referring primarily to the necessary skills (the skills are the behaviors developed by learning and exercising). With 4-5 competencies the results are quite accurate. It is recommended to use a maximum of 10 competencies because the more they are the number of exercises involved is increasing, the time needed for the entire process is longer and the effort done by the assessors is higher. Frequently, the Assessment Centers are organized for 3-4 candidates, maximum 7. It is recommended for an assessor to evaluate maximum 2 candidates.

Some examples of competencies:

Planning and organization; leadership; results oriented; negotiation; adaptability; relationship skills; creativity; communication skills.

The meeting of the assessors after the Assessment Center

- The reunion of the assessors
- Discussing the observations and the evaluations given to each competency for each candidate
- The observations for each behavior must be listed as positive or negative
- The summation of the behaviors, how many positive, how many negative and the final grades given to each candidate
- Taking the final decision – taking in consideration the grade received in the Assessment Center, the job requirements, the interview and the organizational culture

The Assessment Centers, similar to the psychological tests, need to be validated. The first studies have shown that the results in regards to this method are positive. Therefore, the method has been developed and utilized on a wide scale. An older study made in the USA by James Hock has shown that the probability of choosing a manager with subsequent good results is: 15% if selection is done by first impression; 35% if selection is completed with the evaluation of candidate's management skills by other methods than the assessment center; 75% if the selection is the result of the evaluations done by the superior managers of the job and the results of the assessment center. It has been noticed that the validity of the Assessment Centers is higher when there are more than one competency taken into consideration, when the assessors are psychologists, not managers and when there are used simultaneously evaluations by managers and evaluations done by professionals.

Advantages and disadvantages of the Assessment Center

Besides advantages, there are also disadvantages of the Assessment Centers. A company can loose a part of the candidates, as they can refuse participating in such a process, for personal reasons. But statistically this does not happen too often. Also, it can be very time consuming, as it has sessions of over 4 hours duration. More over, it is difficult to realize such an assessment and to draw all the conclusions can take few days. On one hand, this method might seem as lost time, but on the other hand for managers it saves time, because they have the possibility to know all the candidates in one day, without being necessary to see them in separate interviews.

In regards to the advantages, this method insures a higher objectivity, as in the recruitment and selection process there are more than two observers. Usually, along with the candidates, there are two to four assessors who take part in the process. The ideal case is to have at least one assessor for each candidate. Another advantage is that for the duration of the evaluation, the manager has the possibility to observe the behavior and the reactions of the candidate and he is able to compare these reactions in real time. The comparison is rigorous, as all the candidates participate in this process having the same conditions and they have to answer to the same requests. During the role plays is clearly emphasized the place each participant could take as a team member.

Case study

I will present now the Assessment Center for the Key Account Manager job, which was organized in August 2008 in Bucharest, having myself as a Coordinator. Following the preliminary interviews and the personality tests priori applied, resulted that 8 candidates are suitable and fitting the requirements of the job profile, whilst the necessary number of employees on this position was 4.

The details of the competencies and the exercises used for this Assessment Center are described hereby. After analyzing the responsibilities that are necessary for a candidate to perform very good on the Key Account Manager position, we identified the following competencies as being the ones supporting the performance in this specific activity: **results orientation, negotiation, relationship skills, influencing skills.**

The exercises used in this assessment center are as follows:

1. The plane crashed in the desert – an exercise for observing the influencing skills, relationship skills and negotiation skills.
2. Negotiation for coins – an exercise for observing the influencing skills, relationship skills, negotiation skills
3. Plasticize sharing. – an exercise for observing the influencing and relationship skills.
4. Puzzle, while blindfolded and hands tied. – an exercise for observing the results orientation, relationship and influencing skills.

Processing the information and drawing the conclusion, based on the Key Account Manager Assessment Center - Bucharest, August 2008

The processed information is referring to the behaviors that were noted by each assessor during the 4 exercises, for every candidate that was assigned to them at the beginning of the Assessment Center. Each behavior noted by the assessor was discussed by all the team of assessors, in order to be placed to the competency where it belongs to. The assessor which noted the behavior, when it was necessary had to give explanations to make the task easier for all other, in order to assign the behavior to the right competency. Although at the first sight it seems to be a very easy task, it is actually not easy at all. This is because for each candidate, there were noted approximately 20 behaviors for every exercise and each one of these exercises had to be discussed by the assessors' team while processing the information. In this stage, it was very useful to have all competencies divided by behaviors. Also, some of the assessors noted instead of clear, precise behaviors, vague observations or assumptions, general ideas. In this situation the assessor was asked to describe exactly the situation and the behavior of the candidate. This is one of the reasons why it is much indicated that the processing of the information to be done in a short while after the assessment center (as the information shall be still fresh in the memory of the assessor).

After the evaluators agreed on every behavior and classified it to the right competency, every behavior had to be divided into positive or negative. This went faster, as the discussion on behaviors was already done. Therefore, for each competency, for each candidate, the result was a number of positive behaviors and a number of negative behaviors. These numbers were introduced into an Excel table and the candidates were classified on every competency, following the behavior they had during the Assessment Center.

Another stage was to decide the importance, in percentages, of each selection method in taking the final decision. We considered the most important methods the professional knowledge test and the Assessment Center results, followed by the psychological tests results and at the end the interview. Another information would have been the salary required by each candidate but in our case all the candidates' requirements matched the salary range offered by the employer. Combining all these methods we finalised the clasification of the canidates for the Key Account Manager job.

Final results: Marius - 10.00; Marian – 9.60; Tudor – 9.20; Florin – 9.00; Crina – 7.80; Dorin – 7.40; Cristian – 6.80; Marcel – 4.60

Final order: Marius, Marian, Tudor, Florin, Crina, Dorin, Cristian, Marcel

Although before organizing the Assessment Center we had 8 candidates fitting the requirements of the job profile and it was really difficult to choose between them, after the Assessment Center, we forwarded to the employer 4 candidates for the final interview: Marius, Marian, Tudor and Florin. They were all hired after the final interview, which means that our team had a success rate of 100% in finding the right persons for the Key Account Manager position.

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