Clients often ask us how to promote diversity and reduce adverse impact within an organisation – and specifically within exercises used in assessment centres. Here, we provide an overview of our advice including:

- How our exercises inherently and actively seek to promote diversity, and reduce adverse impact within an organisation.
- The case for assessment centres as a specific method for selection, both as an independent entity and in comparison to other potential selection methods.
- Summary of the recommendations for assessment centre best practice as outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS), which we follow closely.

In-built reduction of adverse impact through robust design

Perhaps the most relevant evidence for the reduced risk of adverse impact from our assessment centre exercises is in their design, which contains several features that inherently seek to measure candidates on a purely objective basis. The initial approach taken will be to perform a job analysis to identify relevant behaviours that can be mapped to competencies, which can be measured during different stages of the assessment. This design approach aims to minimise any risk of unconscious bias by measuring only job-related factors; in theory, no factors other than those directly related to job-relevant behaviours should be considered. We actively encourage clients to pilot their exercises on existing job holders to ensure the level of complexity is appropriate, as well as to confirm the exercises are measuring the target competencies correctly.
How assessment centres level the playing field

The candidate view

Assessment centres have very strong face validity and perceptions of job relatedness:

- Generally, participants view assessment centre exercises as being fair, and having high job relatedness since it is easy for candidates to understand why and how a particular exercise pertains to the specific role they are applying for (Gilliland, 1993). This can be attributed to the initial job analysis determining exactly which behaviours and competencies are likely to be relevant to the role.

- Secondly, candidates generally feel assessment centres provide them with an opportunity to perform (Nickolaou & Judge, 2007), especially when compared to other methods, particularly those used in the early stages of selection. The opportunity to perform has been shown to be associated with perceptions of fairness of process, notably in those who were unsuccessful in the process (Schleicher et al, 2006).

Understanding adverse impact within specific population groups

Beyond studies looking at the way in which assessment centres generally reduce adverse impact, there are several studies that have specifically looked at the success rates of various groups. For example, assessment centres are generally associated with low adverse impact against women and minorities. Indeed, women have been found to score higher than men in general during assessment centres, particularly those that measure competencies related to communication (Anderson et al., 2006).

Assessment centres have also found to be far less susceptible to adverse impact than cognitive ability tests, particularly when looking at differences in race. This should be taken into account when designing assessment centres, particularly when cognitive ability has already been measured at other stages of the assessment. In the case of interview simulations, where factors such as interpersonal or communication skills are measured above cognitive skills, there is likely to be little adverse impact (Ployhart & Holtz, 2008). To this end, a number of US court decisions have recommended the use of assessment centres in cases where the use of cognitive ability tests has resulted in adverse impact (Thorton & Gibbons, 2009). In the same vein, a study by Bernardin, Konopaske & Hagan (2012) found that when compared to other selection methods, an assessment centre would have resulted in the promotion of more black and female managers.
However, some studies have shown some potential bias towards a particular gender or race. As we have discussed, women often outperform men in assessment centres (Anderson et al, 2006), while another study (Dean, Roth & Bobko, 2008) found evidence that white candidates receive significantly higher ratings than black candidates. Unfortunately, it is unclear with these studies whether the assessment centres and exercises undertaken were following best practice, including whether they were initially well designed or trialled with appropriate groups. Moreover, they may not be generalisable as they were often run using relatively small sample sizes, and it is unclear as to exactly what several of the assessment centres were actively trying to measure.

The importance of assessor training
One study (Falk & Fox, 2014) highlights the need to consider the composition and training of assessment centre raters. The study discovered that in assessment centre groups with a larger proportion of female candidates, scores were found to be greater for male candidates, even when the assessor group was made up of a majority women. Another study, (Kraiger & Ford), found that there was a tendency for assessors to give higher ratings to individuals of their own race. This shows the importance of training all assessors to be aware of the biases they are likely to hold, alongside ensuring that assessor groups are at least as equally diverse as the candidate group they are assessing.

BPS recommendations and our approach
These studies ultimately serve to highlight the need for best practice when running assessment centres, taking into account the information discussed above, alongside the best practices outlined by the BPS. We follow the best practices both during the design stage and during the running of the centre. Moreover, our former CEO, Nigel Povah, was a member of the committee that initially designed several of the recommendations regarding assessment centre best practice and diversity.

In terms of BPS recommendations:
- The content of the assessment is always designed in line with that of the job, for instance in terms of language requirements.
- The assessor training we deliver seeks to highlight fairness and avoidance of discrimination, helping to ensure that assessors are aware of their own potential biases, both conscious and unconscious.
- The BPS also recommend using an appropriately diverse group of assessors, taking into account the diversity of the candidate pool during the assignment process. General assessment centre staff should also be held to the same diversity standards as assessors.
- Finally, it is recommended that diversity research is consistently undertaken using data from the assessment centre, to ensure that no group is performing differently to any other.

Ultimately, assessment centres provide an inherently strong opposition to adverse impact, as long as they are initially designed in line with the BPS guidelines, as we follow and expand on, and undertaken with best practice in mind.
References


About PSI Talent Measurement

PSI Talent Measurement solutions enable organisations to identify and select the highest performing human capital across the widest range of job roles. Our unique blend of scientifically proven assessment content, market leading technology and our extensive knowledge and expertise, ensure we deliver selection methods that drive individual and organisational effectiveness.

In June 2017, a&dc (a PSI business) was acquired by PSI Services LLC, joining forces to deliver innovative assessment content using world leading technology.