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ASSESSMENT CENTRE APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

EMLOYERS and the top management in many work organizations in the country base their decisions on employee selection, promotion, performance appraisal and training on some conventional methods like tests, interviews and rating scales. Studies carried out in ten organizations in the country attest to this.¹ The studies revealed the wide usage of these conventional methods but a low level of awareness for the approach suggested in this article.

In this paper a multi-dimensional approach to managerial selection, appraisal, training and development is presented. This approach—the assessments centre system—represents a much viable alternative to the traditional practices in management development in Nigeria.

Tests

Some of the conventional tests are ability and aptitude tests. Ability tests are usually aimed at examining the presence of certain ability traits which are believed to be critical in the performance of a job or a role for which the candidate is being considered.

Aptitude tests measure general ability which is expected to be applied to particular jobs.²

Sometimes special aptitude tests are constructed, borrowing items from here and there. In fact, indiscriminate use of aptitude tests alone is likely to bring down the predictability of job success.

For example, Thorndike and Hagen³ obtained 12,000 correlations between aptitude test scores and various measures of later occupational success, on over 10,000 respondents and concluded that the number of significant correlations did not exceed what would be expected by chance.

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Tests cannot accurately predict job success, potential for promotion and training.

A comprehensive battery of tests will provide only a small sample of a person's total pattern of behaviour⁴.

Tests might not be able to predict other extraneous factors like poor adjustment to boss and peers, lack of motivation, lack of interest in his work, family problems and faking answers in order to be acceptable.⁵

Interviews

Interviews are organized generally in the final stages of selection after top talents among the applicants are identified through tests. It is generally at this stage that the management or administrators of the organization, who otherwise have little time to spare, come into the picture to ensure that only good candidates are filtered in.

Interviews, as a source of employee selection, promotion and training, is highly subjective. The decisions made by the interviewer are based upon his opinion, and that opinion is subject to bias and prejudice. In addition, interviews are not standardized, and it is difficult to quantify the results. Equally important is the fact that the desire of an applicant to get the job might make him behave in an unnatural fashion.

Countless research experiments have demonstrated that the opinions and biases of the interviewer have a powerful in-

fluence upon the decisions reached.⁶

Rating Scales

Rating scales usually personal and behaviour traits like co-operative, personality, attitude and judgement. It is to be noted that there is nothing debarring people with different personalities from being equally effective in job performance.

The problems of rating scales have been particularly noted to be centred around known errors of halo effect, leniency or strictness, central tendency and inter-personal bias.⁷

THE ASSESSMENT CENTRE APPROACH

An "assessment centre" refers to a standardized off-the-job procedure used to identify managerial potential for purposes of selection, placement, promotion and/or development.⁸

Mode of Operation

In the assessment centre approach, the organization develops its own internal resources for the continuous assessment of its members and for the selection of its new employees.

At the start, the help of an external agent or a testing consultant may be used, but once the system is established, external help should be minimized.

One of the roles of an external agent in an assessment centre is to develop internal resources; for example, training the line managers or staff members who would be the assessors.

Such internal resource—development will enable the system, when established, continue to function in the absence of the external agent. The external agent becomes a specialist after the system is established and is used by the organiza-

tion only when its internal resources lack certain skills required for assessing. In some instances, the organization may employ part-time experts who participate in the activities of the centre.

In employee selection, assessment centres use multiple measurements or evaluation techniques such as management games, leaderless group discussions, in-basket exercises, mock selection interviews, tests, biographical questionnaires and observation of assessee behaviour by trained assessors.

The data on the assessee in this approach would elicit patterns of behaviour previously identified as successful in a given management position for which the candidates are assessed.⁹

In appraisal, promotion, and training exercises, assessment centre approach employs procedures which accurately assess the dimensions of managerial effectiveness like organization and planning, decision-making, creativity, human relations skills, behaviour flexibility personal impact, tolerance of uncertainty, resistance to stress, inner work standards, energy, realism of expectation, goal flexibility and ability.

In addition, interviews, in-basket exercises, group discussions and projective personality tests, general ability tests, personality inventories and biographical information blanks are used.

Assessors can observe all and record and make evaluations and recommendations as appropriate for promotion, salary increase and training.

In self-development, the assessment centre approach employs the feed-back system. Participants take part in professionally led critiques of their performance in group activities, and they watch their performance in groups by means of video tapes.

In addition, career counselling and planning discussions are often combined with assessors' feedback. In this approach, centre participants are greatly sensitized to their own short-

comings and open to development ideas and training.

Problems

The first problem in most assessment centre programmes is the reliance on the supervisor to nominate employees for participation. Some high-potential employees may never be nominated because qualities of aggressiveness, curiosity, and intelligence that might make a person successful at higher levels of management are not always appreciated by lower level supervision. To get around this problem, some companies which make the use of assessment centres adopt self-nomination procedures or put everyone at a particular level of management through a programme.

Other organizations have devised a system of nominations based on personnel department records indicating interest in advancement such as application for educational aid.

The second problem associated with an assessment centre is about the individual who attends the assessment centre and does poorly. The individual usually recognizes his poor performance whether or not he receives a formal feed-back. He might feel demoralized and want to quit the organization for another job where his chances are untained by his poor assessment centre performance. This problem could be eliminated through expert handling of the feed-back process. Anxiety at an assessment centre can also be a problem.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the assessment process is stress-provoking and that the performance of a few participants is affected by stress. This problem is removed because the assessors usually recognize this problem and it is taken into consideration in the final assessment judgement.

An assessment centre is very expensive. It requires a degree of sophistication of personnel and psychological knowledge.¹¹

The assessee would have to be accommodated and catered for during the period of assessment. In

some international organizations, assessee have to be brought from their different local areas to the centre for assessment.

The cost of maintaining assessee by the organization would include travel, accommodation, and feeding. The assessors—whether internal or external—would also have to be remunerated.

However, considering the cost of faulty selection of managers with its consequent effect upon performance, turn-over, and morale, the cost effectiveness becomes evident.

Demonstrated Attractions

An assessment centre, with its high validity, will eliminate to a large extent problems of subjectivity associated with interviews and tests in employee selection. The likelihood of hiring wrong hands through an assessment centre is very low. All studies so far strongly support the use of assessment centre procedure as the most effective method of management selection.¹²

An assessment centre will remove frustration and low morale which could result from overlooking capable candidates for promotion which is possible with the use of conventional methods like rating scales. This is achievable through concise procedures which accurately assess the various dimensions of managerial effectiveness.

Research studies support the conclusion that behaviour observed in assessment centres can be evaluated (i.e. rated and ranked) with high inter-rater reliability by staff members.¹³

Overall ratings and predictions made at assessment centres have been validated against a variety of criteria, such as:

1. job performance;
2. job progress (salary increase and promotion).¹⁴

Assessment data can be useful in allocating training and development expenditures and in planning new

development programmes in an organization.¹⁵ This is achievable by the assessment centre by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of participants on the dimensions the organization has previously identified as important to success. Consequently, assessment data eliminate pouring thousands of naira down the drain and rationalize training.

An assessment centre can also aid in stimulation of self-development in employees. Participation in an assessment centre is a developmental experience.

As can be quickly recognized, many assessment exercises such as in-basket, management games, and leaderless group discussions also are training exercises. There is a great deal of evidence that most participants gain in self-insight from participating in assessment exercises and this insight is fairly accurate.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

CONSIDERING the vital importance of human assets in organizational growth or decay, and the immense benefits of assessment system in the attainment of organizational growth and employee development, many large and medium-sized organizations in Nigeria stand to benefit from this relatively new technique if adopted in place of conventional methods.

Organizations that use assessment centres have clearly indicated satisfaction with the results.¹⁷

The assessment centre system, despite its problems, possesses benefits that are valuable to organizations and their human assets. Once established assessment centre are highly efficient and can form a good system of recruiting capable employees and forming a base for training and developmental activities. Assessment cen-

tre approach would go a long way in improving productivity through judicious investment in appropriate training programmes and motivating workers who are properly evaluated and promoted accordingly.

Every method has its limitations but the advantages of the assessment centre system are immense and Nigerian organizations should try this multi-dimensional approach to management development.

Many previous management development techniques and instruments have had great popular success but have waned when the spotlight of empirical research was trained on them.¹⁸

Perhaps the objective and developmental nature of the assessment centre strategy discussed thus far will yield a new dimension in the improvement of management in work organizations in Nigeria if considered for adoption.

APPENDIX

METHODS IN USE IN TEN ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED IN NIGERIA (MANAGERIAL LEVEL)

S/N.	Organizations Studied	Method of Recruitment	Performance Appraisal and Promotion Technique	Training Needs Technique	Awareness of Assessment Centres
1	Metalloplastica	Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal, Formats	Nil
2	West African Milk Company	Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal Formats	Nil
3	Bata	Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal Formats and information on individual workers by Heads of Departments	Nil
4	Volkswagen of Nigeria	Aptitude Tests and Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal Formats and Interviews	Nil
5	BEWAC	Interviews	Confidential Reporting System	Reports on Individuals in the closed system and organizational needs	Nil

6	Flour Mills	Aptitude Tests and Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal Formats	Nil
S/N.	Organizations Studied	Method of Recruitment	Performance Appraisal and Promotion Technique	Training Needs Technique	Awareness of Assessment Centres
7	Cehmical and Allied Products Limited	Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal Formats	Nil
8	Berger Paints	Aptitude Tests and Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Appraisal Formats	Nil
9	ALUMACO	Interviews	Informal System. Reliance on Divisional Managers for information about performance of individual workers in their divisions	Deterioration of performance and organizational needs	Nil
10	Nigeria Breweries Limited	Interviews	Rating Scales	Employee Approval Formats	Nil

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