

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London
Unit of Assessment: 17, Business and Management Studies
Title of case study: Making assessment centres work for employers
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 to present
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Assessment centres are used by companies and organisations worldwide to measure the skills and potential of job applicants in recruitment and current employees for promotion. Yet empirical research demonstrates that such assessments do not measure what is claimed. Dewberry, Jackson and collaborators have developed an alternative model of task-based assessment centres which has been used successfully by major corporations across the world, transforming assessment practice.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>When Jackson joined Birkbeck in 2014, he had already been working for some time on the topic of assessment centres. The assessment centre process, in which candidates for a role or promotion are asked to perform a series of tasks under observation and evaluated on their performance, is widely used in employee selection, development, and promotion processes around the world. Jackson's research challenges the validity of the historically dominant model for assessment centre practice, focused on measuring dimensions to predict job performance.</p> <p>A dimension-based assessment centre seeks to measure candidates' 'dimensions' or competencies (such as teamwork or communication skills), giving a score against those skills identified as important for the performance of a particular role to evaluate their suitability for the job. However, research published by Jackson in 2005 and 2010 disputed the degree to which dimensions were measured in assessment centres and thus questioned their role in predicting candidate success once recruited; In his 2005 article he went so far as to suggest that in HR terms, dimensions 'may hold no meaning whatsoever'.</p> <p>Meanwhile at Birkbeck, Dewberry had been working on decision-making and assessment, proposing a new model for understanding decision-making styles (looking at decision regulation as well as decision-making itself) [3], exploring the impact of personality and decision-making style on decision-making competence [1], and investigating the impact of assessor severity or leniency on performance appraisal in settings where the assessor and appraisee do not come into direct contact [2].</p> <p>Jackson and Dewberry joined forces in 2014 and produced two articles (both published in 2016) which argued for the use of an alternative to dimension-based assessment: task-based assessment centres, which replace the abstract skill testing of a dimension-based assessment centre with a focus on candidate performance in specific, job-relevant tasks. Evaluating skills within the context of their use, as task-based assessment centres encourage, has been shown to produce consistent results which offer employers a more useful and reliable picture of any given candidate's likely performance in-role.</p> <p>The 2016 study by Jackson, Michaelides, Dewberry, and Kim [4] 'used Bayesian generalizability theory to unconfound all of the possible effects contributing to variance in Assessment Centre ratings.' Results suggested that 'dimension-related effects have no practical impact on the reliability of Assessment Centre ratings' and that 'effects related to general performance and exercises accounted for almost all the reliable variance in Assessment Centre ratings'.</p> <p>Jackson and Dewberry's further 2016 article [5] explored some of the perceived problems with and failings of Assessment Centres from the perspectives of employers, assessors and candidates being assessed. The nature of the article attests to the applied focus of the pair's</p>

research, which is aimed not only at exploring the theory underpinning Assessment Centres but also at understanding and improving their real-world application.

Dissemination activity relating to the work above brought Jackson and Dewberry into contact with Simon Toms, a research psychologist at PCL, a psychological consultancy which delivers assessment solutions for corporate clients. Using data from PCL, they undertook a research project which applied the insights generated from their work on task-based assessment to 360-degree assessments (where candidates are rated by colleagues at the same, higher and lower organizational levels) to offer a more nuanced understanding of this widely used but still partially understood tool [6]. In particular, the research found that although most 360-degree assessments have a dimension focus, this does not reflect what they in fact deliver (an overall performance evaluation that is highly dependent on the role of the person carrying out the rating). A change in approach akin to that for assessment centres is therefore indicated.

3. References to the research

1. Dewberry, C., Juanchich, M. and Narendran, S. (2013). Decision-making competence in everyday life: The roles of general cognitive styles, decision-making styles and personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 55 (7), 783-788.
2. Dewberry, C., Davies-Muir, A., and Newell, S. (2013). Differences in assessor severity/leniency in non-appraisal performance evaluation. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*. 21 (3), 286-293.
3. Dewberry, C., Juanchich, M., & Narendran, S. (2013). The latent structure of decision styles. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 54, 566-571.
4. Jackson, D. J. R., Michaelides, M., Dewberry, C., & Kim, Y. (2016). Everything that you have ever been told about assessment center ratings is confounded. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101, 976-994. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/apl0000102>
5. Dewberry, C., & Jackson, D. J. R. (2016). The perceived nature and incidence of dysfunctional assessment center features and processes. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 24, 189-196. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijasa.12140>
6. Jackson, D. J. R., Michaelides, G., Dewberry, C., Schwencke, B., & Toms, S. (in press). The implications of unconfounding multisource performance ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. <http://dx.do.org/10.1037/apl0000434>

4. Details of the impact

Assessment centres are widely used in recruitment and promotion processes across private and public-sector organizations worldwide. Historically these centres have been competency- or dimension-based (seeking to measure candidates' performance according to behavioural dimensions such as teamwork, communication skills etc.). However, Jackson and Dewberry's work demonstrates that such assessment centres do not measure the dimensions that are claimed.

This is a profound challenge to established research and practice and the implications are significant: if recruitment and promotion processes are inaccurate, then people recruited and promoted into roles are likely to be candidates that do not fit with their work environment, with negative consequences for the long-term health of the company employing them and for the well-being of the employees themselves. Assessment centres can also be used to inform employee development programmes, meaning that where dimension-based assessment centres are used, training resources will be inaccurately targeted, wasting money and time.

Jackson et al's unique and progressive approach stands out from the crowd in that it not only outlines the limitations of competency-based assessment but presents an alternative that is demonstrably more accurate: task-based assessment. As such, it has proven critical to the development of practice within the discipline. By disseminating their work widely across practitioners and by working directly with companies to develop their practice around recruitment and promotion, Jackson et al have changed how assessment centres are carried out worldwide, creating commercial benefit for the companies whose behaviour has changed

as well as personal and economic benefit for the employees whose skills are now more accurately assessed.

Work with consultants

Jackson and Dewberry's work on assessment centres has had considerable impact through its uptake by numerous international recruitment consultancies, all of whom work with clients in different industry sectors across the world to design HR processes for promotion and recruitment. As well as the direct business benefits to these consultancies and their employees, Jackson and Dewberry's influence on their practice has improved hiring practices in dozens of companies worldwide.

[redacted]

[Consultancy B]'s primary business is to provide assessment services to the pharmaceutical, biotech and healthcare sector, typically working with 5 or 6 'large internationally-based' companies each year to facilitate promotions and career development at management (80%) and directorial level (20%). [Consultancy B] lists recent clients as follows [redacted]. These companies represent a major share of the global market, employ over 450,000 staff around the world, and reported combined revenues of over US\$265 billion in the most recent available figures. Spending on recruitment and hiring is considerable and the decisions made at management and directorial levels are crucial to determining the companies' ongoing direction and success.

[Consultancy C] is based in Auckland, New Zealand, and in 2020 employed 12 staff. It provides assessment services for recruitment and promotion to a variety of companies across New Zealand and internationally, with partners including [redacted] (which employs approximately 1,000 staff in the country), [redacted] (approximately 2,000 NZ-based staff), [redacted] (a co-operative with a revenue of NZ\$19.23 billion in 2017), [redacted] (approximately 5,500 FTE staff), and [redacted] (100 corporate employees and over 140,000 contractors worldwide). The consultancy worked directly with Jackson in 2016 to develop assessment tools for use in their day-to-day work.

[Consultancy D] is a global consultancy that has worked with Jackson since 2012 to create and deliver user-friendly, integrated assessment and development systems for its international clients. Case studies on the [Consultancy D] website discuss the benefits of these systems for clients such as [redacted] (which employs approximately 25,000 staff in 50 countries), [redacted] (which employs approximately 6,000 people) and [redacted], a utility company with approximately 400 UK employees. [Consultancy D] worked with [redacted], a company in [the Middle East] with over 1,000 employees, to design a bespoke leadership development programme which included both pre and post programme assessment centres and which ran between 2014 and 2019. Outcomes included a stronger leadership pipeline, increased retention and better succession planning. A partnership with [redacted], a multinational financial services company with over 53,000 employees, created a custom programme to identify leadership talent within the organisation and helped the group to retain high potential talent, implement and cascade succession plans and increase employee engagement, all of which led to outstanding business and financial results for the year.

[Consultancy A] provides business psychology solutions that are grounded in research, working with clients across all industry sectors. Jackson collaborated with [Consultancy A] in the design, development, and delivery of a developmental assessment center that ran nationwide.

ASSESTA is the largest assessment consultancy firm in South Korea, managing assessment programmes for the Seoul Metropolitan Government as well as a number of educational facilities throughout the country. Their consultant Young-Jae Kim collaborated with Jackson and Dewberry on publication [4]. As a result of this work, Assesta expanded both its research scope and the size of the team working on assessment centres; and the clients with whom the consultancy works benefited from their increased knowledge and expertise. [F]

Psychological Consultancy Limited (PCL), based in Tunbridge Wells, is a firm of business psychologists who work with corporate clients to deliver assessment solutions for recruitment and employee engagement. Between 2017 and 2019, Jackson and Dewberry worked with PCL to complete a research project using data from PCL's 360-degree psychometric assessments, which resulted in a joint publication with PCL's Principal Research Psychologist, Dr Simon Toms [7]. The insights generated by the research changed the way that the company viewed academic research.

Working with individual organisations directly

In 2019, Jackson began working with the Metropolitan Police on their promotions and hiring systems. Informed by this collaboration, the police force permanently changed their practice to reflect the lessons of Jackson's work. The impact of these changes is significant. The Met is the UK's largest police service, attracting 25% of the country's total police budget. Having better people in post within the police benefits both the taxpayer and also the population of London, through the provision of a police force working to the best of its ability.

Shaping international guidelines

In 2015, Dewberry and Jackson were invited on the basis of their research in this area to contribute to the official British and international standards for ACs, respectively [I, J]. These guidelines provide the sole international standard for assessment centre use and application, governing global practice. Jackson's influence can be seen in the fact that, for the first time since the standards were introduced in 1975, the 2015 guidelines allow for assessment centres to be scored by exercise (e.g. a separate score for role play, group discussion, and presentation) where previously only assessment by dimension (e.g. teamwork, communication skills), aggregated across different exercises, had been permitted. This directly reflects the findings of Jackson and Dewberry's research; and their input into these standards can therefore be seen to extend the reach of their work across the whole sector worldwide.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Testimonial from [Consultancy A] (Singapore)
- B. Testimonial from [Consultancy B], USA
- C. Testimonial from [Consultancy C], New Zealand
- D. Testimonial from [Consultancy D]
- E. [Consultancy D website]
- F. Testimonial from Young-Jae Kim, Consultant, ASSESTA Co, South Korea
- G. Testimonial from Dr Simon Toms, Principal Research Psychologist, PCL, UK
- H. Testimonial from [redacted], Metropolitan Police
- I. International Taskforce on Assessment Centre Guidelines. (2015). Guidelines and ethical considerations for assessment centre operations *Journal of Management*, 41, 1244–1273. doi:10.1177/0149206314567780
- J. British Psychological Society. (2015). The design and delivery of assessment centres: A standard produced by the British Psychological Society's Division of Occupational Psychology. Leicester, United Kingdom: British Psychological Society.