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not just for promotions any more...

Law Enforcement Use of the Assessment Center Method

By Chief Patrick Olliver
Grandview Heights PD

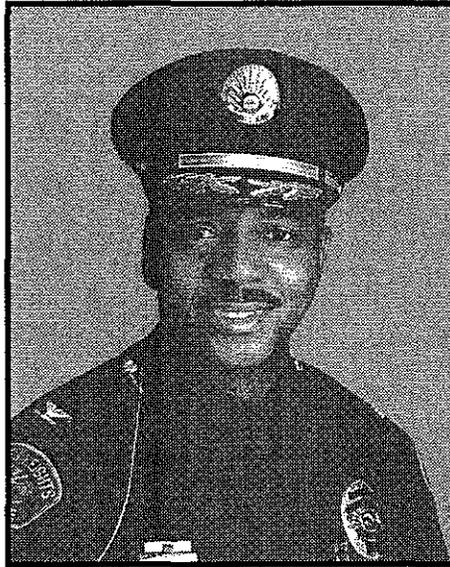
Introduction

Use of the assessment center method in law enforcement has been around approximately 15 years. It was used beginning in the mid 1980's on a pilot basis as part of the promotional process. It grew steadily in its use so that by the late 1980's it became accepted as an effective testing method. Now after approximately 15 years of utilization by law enforcement, the assessment center method is extensively utilized by some governmental entities, restricted in use by others, and used only for specific jobs in others still. All of this begs the question, "What is the appropriate use of the assessment center method in law enforcement?" The answer to this question depends on what the law enforcement agency wants to accomplish, the alternative selection methods available and the resources needed to achieve its goals.

The assessment center method may be used by most law enforcement agencies in the areas of personnel selection and career development. This article will discuss these applications of the assessment center method, including the establishment of fundamental guidelines and organizational considerations.

Assessment Center Defined

The "assessment center method" is the name given to the formal assessment approach pioneered by AT&T in the United States and now used by thousands of organizations worldwide. In the most common application of this method, three or more line managers and a group of six or fewer assessees



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participate in a series of exercises that simulate tasks related to the job for which they are being assessed. After participants have completed the exercises, assessors meet to consider each participant against a predetermined list of job related dimensions to reach an overall evaluation.

Additionally, an **assessment center** is a **standardized testing process** that evaluates the ability to perform specific **job related skills and behaviors**. The assessment center uses scenarios that simulate the functions of the target job.

Assessment center results provide information that predicts **successful** job performance. And the results identify individual and group **training needs**. Assessment center results may also be used to support **career planning and personal development**.

Trained assessors evaluate candidate performance and behavior that reflects **strengths and weaknesses** in job related skills. The assessment center generates **performance-based** information to support a variety of personnel decisions.

The **assessment center** has **five essential elements** which include:

- ✦ Multiple **assessment** scenarios
- ✦ Multiple **trained** assessors
- ✦ Valid **simulation** exercises
- ✦ **Measurable** performance and behavioral **dimensions**
- ✦ **Ratings** based on **compiled, not averaged**, performance scores following a discussion by the raters

Why Assessment Centers Work

The validity of an assessment center is based on six fundamental methodical principals:

- 1) organize the assessment process around target dimensions;
- 2) use current behaviors to predict future behaviors;
- 3) use simulations to elicit job related behavior to be observed, recorded and evaluated;
- 4) use input from multiple simulations to ensure the coverage of all target dimensions;
- 5) use trained assessors to observe and independently evaluate the assessee's behavior;
- 6) integrate data during an organized discussion in which two or more assessors systematically

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Assessment center... (continued)

compare the behavioral insights, then relate those findings to each target dimension to reach an overall decision.

Assessment centers improve the accuracy of selection and development decisions by effectively diagnosing participants' behavioral strengths and development needs. Because of the job relatedness of the simulation, participants more readily accept selection and promotion decisions as fair and accurate. Participants also gain a better understanding of job requirements.

Assessment centers create a learning environment for participants. By taking part in an assessment center, participants can better understand the direction their organization is going and prepare for the "journey." When managers are trained to be assessors, their skills increase in many other managerial tasks, such as conducting coaching and feedback discussions and handling performance appraisals.

The Promotional Assessment Center

Traditionally in law enforcement we have promoted individuals because they were successful in their current job. If someone is a high achiever as an officer, then we assume (in error) that he or she will be good as a sergeant. The problem with this theory is that the current job requires different knowledge, skills and abilities than the target job. Therefore, it is possible to be an excellent officer and a poor sergeant, or a great lieutenant and a lousy captain. Perhaps the most important feature of the assessment center method is that it relates not to current job performance but to future performance. By observing how a participant handles the problems and challenges of the target job, assessors get a valid picture of how that person would perform in the target position. This is especially useful when assessing individuals who hold jobs that don't offer them an opportunity to exhibit behavior related to the target position

or level. This is often the case with individuals who aspire to management positions but hold positions that don't give them an opportunity to exhibit management related behavior on the job.

Prior to an assessment center, a job analysis is conducted to determine the target performance dimensions of the job. The entire system is built around a list of consistently defined dimensions for evaluating all candidates and uses a common rating system. The job analysis procedure usually involves interviewing incumbents and their supervisors and collecting data on critical success factors to identify common criteria that has a direct bearing on job success or failure. Since standard definitions and ratings are used, the decision makers can effectively integrate data from each source. The validity and reliability of the assessment center method can be credited to the six basic underlying methodical concepts previously discussed.

Promotional assessment centers in law enforcement and private industry have been largely successful in the United States. In fact, federal courts have viewed assessment centers as valid and fair. Indeed, they have often mandated assessment centers to overcome selection problems stemming from the use of pencil and paper tests and other selection instruments, e.g., *James C. Edwards V. City of Evanston*; *Frank J. Macchavoca V. New York City Board of Examiners*. I believe that the assessment center method is the most job-related and defensible promotional selection method. However, I also believe it should be supplemented by other tests and criteria in a promotional process. This allows for the inclusion of testing criteria deemed important by the agency.

The Entry Level Assessment Center

The real potential for growth in use of the assessment center method in law

enforcement's current dynamic environment is apparent in our search for the prototype peace officer. He or she is customer service-oriented, is a team player, has high moral and ethical standards, has good written and oral communication skills, has an appreciation of human diversity, has a positive mental attitude, and is a problem-solver possessing good decision making skills. The entry level assessment center can evaluate these skills, knowledge and abilities. I believe evaluating these critical success factors represents a different approach from what is currently being utilized by most law enforcement agencies.

Most law enforcement agencies have a multi-step hiring process which usually contains six to twelve steps. However, I believe the main focus of this multi-step process is to screen for deficiencies which result in job failure, as opposed to screening for criteria geared for job success. These systems are largely effective in doing what they were designed to do, which is screen for severe and obvious behavior deficiencies. When the entry level assessment center is added to this process, the hiring agency seeks candidates possessing successful behavioral dimensions. In this era of community based policing, we should be seeking candidates that are compatible with this philosophy. I suggest that agencies consider using an entry level assessment center. You may discover that candidates are desirable as potential employees until they are measured in an entry level assessment center. The entry level assessment center will identify candidates which are compatible with the agencies philosophies and expose candidates which are not.

Career Development Assessment Center

The second area of potential growth in law enforcement use of the assessment center method is in career

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Assessment center... (continued)

development. An assessment center might be conducted for potential first-line managers to determine their strengths and weaknesses in the job-related dimensions of the target job. There are some obvious benefits to conducting an assessment center as a training exercise. First, candidates are provided with a written summary of their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the target job. Second, management becomes aware of the skill level of its management candidate pool. Third, training, education and communication may be used to increase organizational effectiveness based on the results. An assessment center may also be given to job incumbents to evaluate their job related skills in their current job. This type of assessment has the benefit of helping to focus career development curriculum for job incumbents. It also provides a written job-related summary for the managers which may be used to improve future performance.

Conclusion

In summary, use of the assessment center method by law enforcement has three primary applications: promotional screening, entry-level hiring and career development. Each of these applications uses the same methodology; however, each yields different benefits.

The assessment center method is a proven valid technique that is extremely effective for making selection and promotional decisions and for diagnosing employee development needs. Applied traditionally, it is most appropriate for organizations that process groups of individuals. The assessment center concept can be applied to any situation in which people need to be evaluated, including promotion, performance appraisal and selection interviewing. It is merely a systematic way of obtaining and processing data and making decisions about individuals.

In spite of the confusion stemming from the word "center" in its name, an assessment center never was a place. Now it is no longer a thing. It is a highly flexible methodology. I believe that major growth area in assessment centers will be in applying these key concepts to entry level selection and career development.

OPC

About the author: Patrick Oliver is chief of police for the city of Grandview Heights, Ohio. He is treasurer of the executive committee of the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police and serves on the Advisory Services Committee. Chief Oliver currently is the project director for a research grant with OCJS to study the validity of the use of entry level assessment centers in hiring. He holds a bachelors and masters degree from Baldwin Wallace College, and is a graduate of both PELC and CLEE, OACP.

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