

THE GROWTH OF ASSESSMENT CENTRES



We can trace the existence of Assessment Centres back to 1942, when they were first used by War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs or “Wosbees”) for officer selection.

Their introduction stemmed from the fact that the previous system was resulting in a large proportion of those officers predicted as being successful actually being “Returned to Unit” as unsuitable.

This is hardly surprising, as the system had relied on interviewing officers using selection criteria such as social and educational background. For example, the criteria for assessing serving soldiers nominated for commissioning as officers included “exceptional smartness”.

The new Assessment Centre approach attempted to identify the types of behaviour required of officers to be successful in their job. The tasks included:

- leaderless group exercises
- various selection tests
- individual interviews by a senior officer, junior officer and psychiatrist respectively

This new system duly resulted in a substantial drop in “RTUs”, and during the post-war years this system was so successful that it was introduced for selection to the Civil Service. A variation of it is still used for officer selection in the Armed Forces.

In industry, the growth of Assessment Centres and Development Centres has accelerated more recently. In 1986 slightly more than one quarter of organisations who employed 500 people or more used development centres, and by 1993 that had risen to 45%.

Organisations have come to realise that to be competitive they must constantly invest in the development of their staff in order to respond effectively to an increasingly uncertain marketplace.

Rather than selecting new employees, organisations are now investing more in their existing workforce.

Whereas traditionally companies would use external training courses, there is now an increasing emphasis on in-house “bespoke” training that is relevant to the organisation's needs and business objectives.

In addition, a final compelling reason for the growth in use of Development Centres has been the widespread adoption of behavioural competencies.