CHAPTER 7

SELECTION METHODS AND DECISIONS

THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS CHAPTER ARE TO:

1 EXPLAIN THE IMPORTANCE OF VIEWING SELECTION AS A TWO-WAY PROCESS

2 EXAMINE THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF SELECTION CRITERIA

3 EVALUATE THE RANGE OF SELECTION METHODS THAT ARE AVAILABLE (INTERVIEWING WILL BE DEALT WITH IN DETAIL IN THE INTERACTIVE SKILLS SECTION OF THE FOCUS ON SKILLS AT THE END OF PART II) AND CONSIDER THE CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING DIFFERENT METHODS

4 REVIEW APPROACHES TO SELECTION DECISION MAKING

5 EXPLAIN HOW SELECTION PROCEDURES CAN BE VALIDATED

While the search for the perfect method of selection continues, in its absence HR and line managers continue to use a variety of imperfect methods to aid the task of predicting which applicant will be most successful in meeting the demands of the job, and/or be the best fit with the work group and culture of the organisation. Selection is increasingly important as more attention is paid to the costs of poor selection, in a very competitive market for talent. This context has promoted greater attention to the applicant's perspective and increasing use of technology in selection. In addition equal opportunities legislation has underlined the importance of using well-validated selection procedures, so that the selection process discriminates fairly, and not unfairly, between applicants. Chapters 23 and 24 deal with equal opportunity issues.

SELECTION AS A TWO-WAY PROCESS

The various stages of the selection process provide information for decisions by both the employer and the potential employee. While employment decisions have long been regarded as a management prerogative there is considerable evidence that the two-way nature of the process is now being widely acknowledged, and Lievens *et al.* (2002) suggest that labour market shortages have promoted a concern for the organisation's image and the treatment of applicants during the recruitment and selection process. We must also be concerned not only with the job to be done, but also with the work and the organisational context that is offered.

Throughout the selection process applicants choose between organisations by evaluating the developing relationship between themselves and the prospect. This takes place in the correspondence from potential employers; in their experience of the selection methods used by the employer; and in the information they gain on interview. Applicants will decide not to pursue some applications. Either they will have accepted another offer, or they will find something in their dealings with the organisation that discourages them and they withdraw. When large numbers of candidates withdraw it may be because the information provided by the organisation was sufficiently detailed, accurate and realistic that they were able to make a wise decision that they were not suited to the organisation and that time would be wasted by continuing. On the other hand, it might be that potentially admirable recruits were lost because of the way in which information was presented, lack of information, or the interpretation that was put on the 'flavour' of the correspondence.

The frame of reference for the applicant is so different from that of the manager in the organisation that the difference is frequently forgotten. It would not be unrealistic to suggest that the majority of applicants have a mental picture of their application being received by the company and immediately being closely scrutinised and discussed by powerful figures. The fact that the application is one element in a varied routine for the recipient is incomprehensible to some and unacceptable to many. The thought that one person's dream is another's routine is something the applicant cannot cope with.

If they have posted or emailed an application with high enthusiasm about the fresh prospects that the new job would bring, they are in no mood for delay and they may quickly start convincing themselves that they are not interested, because their initial euphoria has not been sustained. If candidates get as far as interview they will also be influenced by recruiter behaviour in deciding whether to accept a job offer, if

one is made. Papadopoulou *et al.* (1996), for example, demonstrated that candidates were influenced by the recruiter's ability to supply adequate and accurate information, as this is what they had expected from the interview. In addition they were influenced by the way the recruiter managed the interaction, as well as the content, so the recruiter's control of the interaction, their listening ability and in particular their ability/willingness to allow the candidate to present themselves effectively are all important.

Some of the points that seem to be useful about interacting with the candidate are:

1. Reply, meaningfully, fast. The printed postcard of acknowledgement is not a reply, neither is the personal letter or email which says nothing more than that the application has been received. Web-based selection can speed things up considerably (for a useful discussion *see* IRS 2001).
2. Conduct correspondence in terms of what the applicants want to know. How long will they have to wait for an answer? If you ask them in for interview, how long will it take, what will it involve, do you defray expenses, can they park their car, how do they find you, etc.?
3. Interviewers should be trained to ensure that they have not only full knowledge of the relevant information, but also the skills to manage the interaction effectively.

SELECTION CRITERIA AND THE PERSON SPECIFICATION

Unless the criteria against which applicants will be measured are made explicit, it is impossible to make credible selection decisions. It will be difficult to select the most appropriate selection procedure and approach, and it will be difficult to validate the selection process. Selection criteria are typically presented in the form of a person specification representing the ideal candidate, and cover such areas as skills, experience, qualifications, education, personal attributes, special attributes, interests and motivation (IRS 2003a). Although the IRS found that person specifications were used by three-quarters of the organisations in their study, Lievens *et al.* (2002) challenge the use of traditional person specifications as jobs become less defined and constantly change. Three perspectives can be used to determine selection criteria – organisational fit, team/functional fit and job fit.

Fit with the organisation

The organisational criteria are those attributes that an organisation considers valuable in its employees and that affect judgements about a candidate's potential to be successful within an organisation. For example, the organisation may be expanding and innovating and require employees who are particularly flexible and adaptable. Previously, these organisational criteria were rarely made explicit and they were often used at an intuitive level. However, Townley (1991) argues that organisations are increasingly likely to focus on more general attitudes and values than narrow task-based criteria. Barclay (1999) explains how fit with the organisation is often expressed in terms of personality, attitudes, flexibility, commitment and goals, rather than the ability to do the specific job for which the person is being recruited. Such organisational criteria are important where jobs are ill defined and constantly

changing. There are also some groups who are recruited into the organisation rather than into specific jobs or even a specific function – new/recent graduates, for example, and, here again, organisation criteria are important.

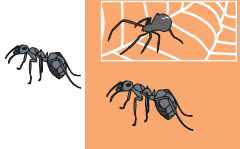
Functional and team fit

Between the generality of the organisational criteria and the preciseness of job criteria there are functional criteria, such as the definition of appropriate interpersonal skills for all members of the HR department. Criteria may also be important when the new appointee will have to fit into a pre-existing work team. For a useful discussion of person/group fit *see* Werbel and Johnson 2001.

Individual job criteria

Individual job criteria contained in job descriptions and person specifications are derived from the process of job analysis. Although it is reasonably easy to specify the factors that should influence the personnel specification, the process by which the specification is formed is more difficult to describe. Van Zwanenberg and Wilkinson (1993) offer a dual perspective. They describe 'job first – person later' and 'person first – job later' approaches. The first starts with analysing the task to be done, presenting this in the form of a job description and from this deriving the personal qualities and attributes or competencies that are necessary to do the task. The difficulty here is in the translation process and the constant change of job demands and tasks. The alternative approach suggested by van Zwanenberg and Wilkinson starts with identifying which individuals are successful in a certain job and then describing their characteristics. There is also a trend towards making the person specification appropriate for a broad band of jobs rather than one particular job.

In addition to, or sometimes instead of, a person specification, many organisations are developing a competency profile as a means of setting the criteria against which to select. Competencies have been defined as underlying characteristics of a person which result in effective or superior performance; they include personal skills, knowledge, motives, traits, self-image and social role (*see* Boyatzis 1982). The advantage of competencies is that they can be used in an integrated way for selection, development, appraisal and reward activities; and also that from them behavioural indicators can be derived against which assessment can take place. For a fuller discussion of the nature and role of competencies, *see* Chapter 17. Woodruffe (2000) and Whiddett and Hollyforde (1999) are useful practical sources of information on how to use competencies in the selection process. It should be noted, however, that using competencies as the only selection criteria is considered to be limiting and unhelpful (*see*, for example, Brittain and Ryder (1999) and Whiddett and Kandola (2000)).



ACTIVITY 7.1

Write a brief job description and a person specification for the anti-rape detective job as described in case 7.1 on the website.

CHOOSING SELECTION METHODS

It is unusual for one selection method to be used alone. A combination of two or more methods is generally used, and the choice of these is dependent upon a number of factors:

1. **Selection criteria for the post to be filled.** For example, group selection methods and assessment centre activities would be most useful for certain types of job, such as managerial, professional, supervisory and those who will be part of self-managing teams.
2. **Acceptability and appropriateness of the methods.** For the candidates involved, or likely to be involved, in the selection. The use, for example, of intelligence tests may be seen as insulting to applicants already occupying senior posts.
3. **Abilities of the staff involved in the selection process.** This applies particularly in the use of tests and assessment centres. Only those staff who are appropriately qualified by academic qualification and/or attendance on a recognised course may administer psychological tests.
4. **Administrative ease.** For administrative purposes it may be much simpler, say, to arrange one or two individual interviews for a prospective candidate than to organise a panel consisting of four members, all needing to make themselves available at the same time. Web-based testing may save much administrative time, particularly when there are large numbers of candidates.
5. **Time factors.** Sometimes a position needs to be filled very quickly, and time may be saved by using telephone or video-based interviews, or organising individual interviews rather than group selection methods, which would mean waiting for a day when all candidates are available.
6. **Accuracy.** Accuracy in selection generally increases in relation to the number of appropriate selection methods used (*see*, for example, IRS 2002a).
7. **Cost.** Tests may cost a lot to set up but once the initial outlay has been made they are reasonably cheap to administer. Assessment centres would involve an even greater outlay and continue to be fairly expensive to administer. Interviews, on the other hand, cost only a moderate amount to set up in terms of interviewer training and are fairly cheap to administer. For the costlier methods great care needs to be taken in deciding whether the improvement in selection decision making would justify such costs.

SELECTION METHODS

Application forms

Growing use is being made of the application form as a basis for employment decisions, and the CIPD (2003) found that they were used in 80 per cent of the organisations they surveyed. For a long time the application form was not suitable for use in that way; it was a personal details form, which was intended to form the nucleus of the personnel record for the individual when they began work. As reservations grew about the validity of interviews for employment purposes, the more productive use of the application form was one of the avenues explored for improving the quality of decisions.

Forms were considered to act as a useful preliminary to employment interviews and decisions, either to present more information that was relevant to such deliberations, or to arrange such information in a standard way. This made sorting of applications and shortlisting easier and enabled interviewers to use the form as the basis for the interview itself, with each piece of information on the form being taken and developed in the interview. While there is heavy use of CVs for managerial and professional posts, many organisations, especially in the public sector, require both – off-putting to the applicant but helpful to the organisation in eliciting comparable data from all applicants.

The application form has been extended by some organisations to take a more significant part in the employment process. One form of extension is to ask for very much more, and more detailed, information from the candidate.

Another extension of application form usage has been in weighting, or biodata. Biodata have been defined by Anderson and Shackleton (1990) as 'historical and verifiable pieces of information about an individual in a selection context usually reported on application forms'. Biodata are perhaps of most use for large organisations filling fairly large numbers of posts for which they receive extremely high numbers of applications. This method is an attempt to relate the characteristics of applicants to characteristics of a large sample of successful job holders. The obvious drawbacks of this procedure are, first, the time that is involved and the size of sample needed, so that it is only feasible where there are many job holders in a particular type of position. Second, it smacks of witchcraft to the applicants who might find it difficult to believe that success in a position correlates with being, *inter alia*, the first born in one's family. Such methods are not currently well used and Taylor (1998) notes the controversial nature and high development costs. In addition the 1998 Data Protection Act prohibits the use of an automated selection process (which biodata invariably are) as the *only* process used at any stage in the procedure.

Generally, application forms are used as a straightforward way of giving a standardised synopsis of the applicant's history. This helps applicants present their case by providing them with a predetermined structure, it speeds the sorting and shortlisting of applications and it guides the interviewers as well as providing the starting point for personnel records. There remain concerns about the reliability of applications forms and CVs and this issue is dealt with in case study 7.2 on the website. Application forms are increasingly available electronically; this not only speeds up the process but also enables 'key word' searches of the data on the forms (for alternative ways in which this may be carried out *see* Mohamed *et al.* (2001)), but there are questions about the legality of this method when used alone.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Using application forms electronically at KPMG

KPMG introduced e-selection for graduates in 2000. The driving forces were company image and quicker and smarter recruitment. They first attempted to use the existing application form in electronic format, and then printed out completed forms. They found this unsatisfactory and developed some more radical ideas. The existing

application was stripped down to collect only essential information to the selection decision, and so that it takes one hour to complete. It is possible for applicants to fill in the form in one sitting or do it over several sessions, as there are facilities to save separate sections of the form on the web. In addition to the application form candidates complete a self-assessment profile which KPMG match against a standard profile which was developed as a benchmark by an occupational psychology company. Once the candidate has sent the completed application form and self-assessment profile to KPMG via the website KPMG aim to email a decision back to the candidate by the following day, as to whether they will progress to the next stage of the selection procedure.

As a result of these procedures KPMG made cost savings – they have reduced headcount in the central recruitment department by 20 per cent, even though in addition to the electronic procedures they also scrutinise each application form individually. They comment that such systems cannot be introduced quickly and should not just replicate the old paper-based system.

Source: Summarised from IRS (2002b) 'Press to select', *Employment Review*, No. 755, 8 July, pp. 37–42.

Self-assessment and peer assessment

There is increasing interest in providing more information to applicants concerning the job. This may involve a video, an informal discussion with job holders or further information sent with the application form. This is often termed giving the prospective candidate a 'realistic job preview' (Wanous 1992), enabling them to assess their own suitability to a much greater extent. However, the CIPD survey (2003) found that only 2 per cent of organisations have taken the opportunity to provide a self-selection questionnaire on the company website. Another way of achieving this is by asking the candidates to do some form of pre-work. This may also involve asking them questions regarding their previous work experiences which would relate to the job for which they are applying.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Job experience day at Pret à Manger

Pret à Manger have reduced staff turnover from 130 per cent (not high for the industry) to 98 per cent. They put this down to the use of a job experience day, which candidates have to do after an initial interview, but before they are granted a further competency-based interview.

Applicants do a day's work for which they are paid and they receive guidance and mentoring from an existing team member who is assigned to them for the day. But the

aim is to enable applicants to work across a wide range of tasks with a wide range of team members. During the day the candidate also has an interview with the shop manager.

Team members who would be the applicant's future colleagues assess the applicant on competencies relevant to the job and then vote at the end of the day as to whether they would employ the applicant. The manager does not get a vote but can lobby for or against any candidate.

The success rate for the day is around 50 per cent. Pret à Manger have found this a good way of sifting large numbers of applicants and at the same time developing team commitment to new recruits.

Source: Summarised from L. Carrington (2002) 'At the cutting edge', *People Management*, Vol. 8, No. 10, 16 May, pp. 30–1.

Telephone interviewing

Telephone interviews can be used if speed is particularly important, and if geographical distance is an issue, as interviews with appropriate candidates can be arranged immediately. CIPD (2003) report that 28 per cent of organisations use this method of selection. There is evidence that telephone interviews are best used as a part of a structured selection procedure, rather than alone – generally in terms of pre-selection for a face-to-face interview. However, they may also have in important role when selecting for jobs in which telephone manner is critical such as call centre and contact centre staff. IRS (2002c) report problems such as lack of non-verbal information and difficulties getting hold of the applicant. However, positive aspects have been reported, such as concentration on content rather than the person. From an applicant perspective IDS found that face-to-face interviews are preferred.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

One large employer requests CVs from applicants, and, on the basis of these, invites a selected number to take part in a telephone interview. A date and time are given and an idea of the questions that will be asked so that the candidate can prepare. The interview takes about 15–20 minutes, and time is allowed for the candidate to ask questions of the interviewer as well. Candidates are also told in advance of the telephone interview that if they are successful at this stage they will be invited to a one-day assessment centre on a specified date. After the telephone interview candidates are notified in writing whether or not they will move on to the assessment centre stage of the selection procedure.

ACTIVITY 7.2

What are the advantages of using telephone interviews of the type described in the box? For what types of job would you use this approach to selection?

Testing

The use of tests in employment procedures is surrounded by strong feelings for and against. Those in favour of testing in general point to the unreliability of the interview as a predictor of performance and the greater potential accuracy and objectivity of test data. Tests can be seen as giving credibility to selection decisions. Those against them either dislike the objectivity that testing implies or have difficulty in incorporating test evidence into the rest of the evidence that is collected. Questions have been raised as to the relevance of the tests to the job applied for and the possibility of unfair discrimination and bias. Also, some candidates feel that they can improve their prospects by a good interview performance and that the degree to which they are in control of their own destiny is being reduced by a dispassionate routine.

Tests remain heavily used, and the key issue debated currently is the extent to which tests should be administered over the web (*see*, for example, IRS 2002a). IRS reported (in 2003b) that 80 per cent of organisations studied used ability tests and 85 per cent used personality tests, although the CIPD (2003) with a larger sample found much lower figures (around 45 per cent for both). IRS found that testing is more likely to be used for management, professional and graduate jobs (2003b) – although as testing on the web becomes more common it is likely to be used for a wider range of jobs.

Tests are chosen on the basis that test scores relate to, or correlate with, subsequent job performance, so that a high test score would predict high job performance and a low test score would predict low job performance.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Online testing at B&Q

B&Q have been using online psychological testing for managers, and this is being extended to all managerial and shop floor appointments. The system cost £12,000 to install and it is expected that costs will be recouped by the end of the first year of full use. B&Q have introduced this in a context of a growing company in a competitive recruitment market, and the tests are open to anyone who can access the website (www.diy.com). Tests are assessed as they are completed and feedback is immediately given to candidates to tell them if they can progress to the next stage of the selection procedure. B&Q argue that this approach avoids bias which may be present when initially assessing CVs. If candidates do not have online access a telephone test is available as an alternative.

E. Davidson (2003) 'You can do it', *People Management*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 20 February, pp. 42–3.

Critical features of test use

Validity

Different types of validity can be applied to psychological tests. Personnel managers are most concerned with predictive validity, which is the extent to which the test can predict subsequent job performance. Predictive validity is measured by relating the test scores to measures of future performance, such as error rate, production rate, appraisal scores, absence rate or whatever criteria are important to the organisation. Sometimes performance is defined as the level of the organisation to which the individual has been promoted – so the criteria here are organisational rather than job specific. If test scores relate highly to future performance, however defined, then the test is a good predictor.

Reliability

The reliability of a test is the degree to which the test measures consistently whatever it does measure. If a test is highly reliable, then it is possible to put greater weight on the scores that individuals receive on the test. However, a highly reliable test is of no value in the employment situation unless it also has high validity.

Use and interpretation

Tests need to be used and interpreted by trained or qualified testers. Test results, especially personality tests, require very careful interpretation as some aspects of personality will be measured that are irrelevant to the job. The British Psychological Society (BPS) can provide a certificate of competence for occupational testing at levels A and B. Both the BPS and CIPD have produced codes of practice for occupational test use. It is recommended that tests are not used in a judgemental, final way, but to stimulate discussion with the candidate based on the test results and that feedback is given to candidates.

In addition it is recommended in the CIPD code that test data alone should not be used to make a selection decision (which could contravene the 1998 Data Protection Act), but should always be used as part of a wider process where inferences from test results can be backed up by other sources. Norm tables and the edition date of a test are also important features to check. For example Ceci and Williams (2000) warn that intelligence is a relative concept and that the norm tables change over time – so using an old test with old norm tables may be misleading.

Problems with using tests

A number of problems can be incurred when using tests.

1 In the last section we commented that a test score that was highly related to performance criteria has good validity. The relationship between test scores and performance criteria is usually expressed as a correlation coefficient (r). If $r = 1$ then test scores and performance would be perfectly related; if $r = 0$ there is no relationship whatsoever. A correlation coefficient of $r = 0.4$ is comparatively good in the testing world and this level of relationship between test scores and performance is generally seen as acceptable. Tests are, therefore, not outstanding predictors of future performance.

2 Validation procedures are very time consuming, but are essential to the effective use of tests. There are concerns that with the growth of web testing, new types of tests, such as emotional intelligence tests, are being developed without sufficient validation (Tulip 2002).

3 The criteria that are used to define good job performance in developing the test are often inadequate. They are subjective and may account to some extent for the mediocre correlations between test results and job performance.

4 Tests are often job specific. If the job for which the test is used changes, then the test can no longer be assumed to relate to job performance in the same way. Also, personality tests only measure how individuals see themselves at a certain time and cannot therefore be reliably reused at a later time.

5 Tests may not be fair as there may be a social, sexual or racial bias in the questions and scoring system. People from some cultures may, for example, be unused to 'working against the clock'.

6 Increasingly organisations are using competencies as a tool to identify and develop the characteristics of high performance. However, as Fletcher (1996) has pointed out, it is difficult to relate these readily to psychological tests. Rogers (1999) reports research which suggests the two approaches are compatible – but there is little evidence to support this so far.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Ensuring tests are 'fair and reasonable' and free from ethnic or sexual bias

Indirect discrimination would result when a test unfairly and unjustifiably disadvantages one race or sex compared with another, and test results need to be monitored to show that is not happening. Organisations need to be able to demonstrate that the test has been developed or tailored and assessed in relation to the job content and person specification. Alternative means of taking the test also need to be developed when the use of tests would disadvantage a disabled person.

Source: Summarised from M. Palmer (2002) 'Very testing testing', *People Management*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 10 January, pp. 18–19.

ACTIVITY 7.3

In what ways could you measure job performance for the following?

- A data input clerk
- A mobile plumber
- A call centre operator
- A supervisor

Types of test for occupational use

Aptitude tests

People differ in their performance of tasks, and tests of aptitude (or ability) measure an individual's potential to develop in either specific or general terms. This is in contrast to attainment tests, which measure the skills an individual has already acquired. When considering the results from aptitude tests it is important to remember that a simple relationship does not exist between a high level of aptitude and a high level of job performance, as other factors, such as motivation, also contribute to job performance.

Aptitude tests can be grouped into two categories: those measuring general mental ability or general intelligence, and those measuring specific abilities or aptitudes.

General intelligence tests

Intelligence tests, sometimes called mental ability tests, are designed to give an indication of overall mental capacity. A variety of questions are included in such tests, including vocabulary, analogies, similarities, opposites, arithmetic, number extension and general information. Ability to score highly on such tests correlates with the capacity to retain new knowledge, to pass examinations and to succeed at work. However, the intelligence test used would still need to be carefully validated in terms of the job for which the candidate was applying. And Ceci and Williams (2000) note that intelligence is to some extent determined by the context – so an individual's test score may not reflect capacity to act intelligently. Indeed practical intelligence, associated with success in organisations, may be different from the nature of intelligence as measured by tests (Williams and Sternberg 2001). Examples of general intelligence tests are found in IDS (2000).

Special aptitude tests

There are special tests that measure specific abilities or aptitudes, such as spatial abilities, perceptual abilities, verbal ability, numerical ability, motor ability (manual dexterity) and so on. An example of a special abilities test is the Critical Reasoning Test developed by Smith and Whetton (*see* IDS 2000).

Trainability tests

Trainability tests are used to measure a potential employee's ability to be trained, usually for craft-type work. The test consists of the applicants doing a practical task that they have not done before, after having been shown or 'trained' how to do it. The test measures how well they respond to the 'training' and how their performance on the task improves. Because it is performance at a task that is being measured, these tests are sometimes confused with attainment tests; however, they are more concerned with potential ability to do the task and response to training.

Attainment tests

Whereas aptitude tests measure an individual's potential, attainment or achievement tests measure skills that have already been acquired. There is much less resistance to such tests of skills. Few candidates for a secretarial/administrative post would refuse to take a typing speed test, or a test on 'Word', 'PowerPoint' or 'Excel' software before interview. The candidates are sufficiently confident of their skills to welcome the opportunity to display them and be approved. Furthermore, they know what they are doing and will know whether they have done well or badly. They are in control, while they feel that the tester is in control of intelligence and personality tests as the candidates do not understand the evaluation rationale. Attainment tests are often devised by the employer.

Personality tests

The debate still rages as to the importance of personality for success in some jobs and organisations. The need for personality assessment may be high but there is even more resistance to tests of personality than to tests of aptitude, partly because of the reluctance to see personality as in any way measurable. There is much evidence to suggest that personality is also context dependent, and Iles and Salaman (1995) also argue that personality changes over time. Both of these factors further complicate the issue. Personality tests are mainly used for management, professional and graduate jobs, although there is evidence of their use when high-performance teams are developed.

Theories of human personality vary as much as theories of human intelligence. Jung, Eysenck and Cattell, among others, have all proposed different sets of factors/traits which can be assessed to describe personality. Based on research to date Robertson (2001) argues that it is now possible to state that there are five basic building blocks of personality: extroversion/introversion; emotional stability; agreeableness; conscientiousness and openness to new experiences.

It is dangerous to assume that there is a standard profile of 'the ideal employee' (although this may fit nicely with theories of culture change) or the ideal personality for a particular job, as the same objectives may be satisfactorily achieved in different ways by different people. Another problem with the use of personality tests is that they rely on an individual's willingness to be honest, as the socially acceptable answer or the one best in terms of the job are seemingly easy to pick out, although 'lie detector' questions are usually built in. Ipsative* tests may seek to avoid the social desirability problem by using a different test structure – but other problems arise from this approach. Dalen *et al.* (2001) did show that tests are manipulable but not sufficiently for the candidate to match an ideal profile, and that such manipulation would be exposed by detection measures within the test. There is a further problem that some traits measured by the test will not be relevant in terms of performance on the job. Myers–Briggs is a well used personality test; for details *see* McHenry (2002). There is at the time of writing an interest in emotional intelligence – tests measure self-awareness, self-motivation, emotional control, empathy and the ability to understand and inspire others.

* Ipsative tests require the candidate to make a *choice*, usually between two statements or adjectives, rather than allowing the candidate to answer, for example, 'true' or 'false' against every statement.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Online testing: the case for and against

While online tests are not widely used at present, there is much interest in developing this area. Tests can be used in one of three different ways:

- uncontrolled – anyone can register to use them on the open internet;
- controlled – the candidate needs first to be registered by the organisation using the test, and their identity must be checked;
- supervised – as above, and a qualified tester from the organisation also logs on and ensures that time limits and other requirements are met.

For:

- Cheaper in the long run
- Immediate analysis
- Immediate feedback to candidate
- Can be used for wider range of (lower-paid) jobs
- Speeds processes and helps to retain potential candidates
- Good for company image
- Can use a wider range of different tests – e.g. video scenarios, followed by 'what would you do next?'
- Can be convenient for applicants

Against:

- Worries over confidentiality and security of personal data
- Appears cold and impersonal
- Open to misuse – who is actually completing the test?
- Can encourage the rapid development of new tests which are not properly validated

Group selection methods and assessment centres

Group methods

The use of group tasks to select candidates is not new – the method dates back to the Second World War – but such measures have gained greater attention through their use in assessment centres. Plumbley (1985) describes the purpose of group selection methods as being to provide evidence about the candidate's ability to:

- get on with others;
- influence others and the way they do this;
- express themselves verbally;
- think clearly and logically;

- argue from past experience and apply themselves to a new problem;
- identify the type of role they play in group situations.

These features are difficult on the whole to identify using other selection methods and one of the particular advantages of group selection methods is that they provide the selector with examples of behaviour on which to select. When future job performance is being considered it is behaviour in the job that is critical, and so selection using group methods can provide direct information on which to select rather than indirect verbal information or test results. The increasing use of competencies and behavioural indicators, as a way to specifiy selection criteria, ties in well with the use of group methods.

Plumbley (1985) identifies three main types of group task that can be used, each of which would be observed by the selectors:

1 **Leaderless groups:** A group of about 6–8 individuals are given a topic of general interest to discuss.
2 **Command or executive exercises:** The members of the group are allocated roles in an extensive brief based on a real-life situation. Each member outlines his or her solution on the basis of their role and defends it to the rest of the group.
3 **Group problem solving:** The group is leaderless and has to organise itself in order to solve, within time limits, a problem that is relevant to the job to be filled. Such tasks may be developed into business games and case studies.

Group selection methods are most suitable for management, graduate and sometimes supervisory posts. One of the difficulties with group selection methods is that it can be difficult to assess an individual's contribution, and some people may be unwilling to take part.

ACTIVITY 7.4

To what extent does a person's behaviour on these group selection tasks accurately reflect behaviour on the job? Why?

Assessment centres

Assessment centres incorporate multiple selection techniques, and group selection methods outlined above form a major element, together with other work simulation exercises such as in-basket tasks, psychological tests, a variety of interviews and presentations. Assessment centres are used to assess, in depth, a group of broadly similar applicants, using a set of competencies required for the post on offer and a series of behavioural statements which indicate how these competencies are played out in practice. Even assuming that the competencies for the job in question have already been identified, assessment centres require a lengthy design process to select the appropriate activities so that every competency will be measured via more than one task. IRS (2002d) note that assessment centres have been proven to be one of the most effective ways of selecting candidates – this is probably due to the use of multiple measures.

Day One Times	Activity	Who is involved
9.30–10.00	Introduction to centre	All
10.00–10.45	General discussion – given topics	All
10.45–11.15	Coffee	
11.15–12.00	General intelligence test	All
12.00–12.30	One-to-one interviews (30 mins each)	Candidates A, B, C
12.30–1.30	Lunch	
1.30–2.00	One-to-one interviews (30 mins each)	Candidates B, E, C
2.00–2.45	Spatial reasoning test	All
2.45–3.15	Coffee	
3.15–4.00	Personality test	All
4.00–4.30	One-to-one interviews (30 mins each)	Candidates C, F, D
Day Two **Times**	**Activity**	**Who is involved**
9.30–10.15	Verbal reasoning test	All
10.15–10.45	One-to-one interviews (30 mins each)	Candidates D, A, F
10.45–11.15	Coffee	
11.15–12.00	Critical thinking test	All
12.00–12.30	One-to-one interviews (30 mins each)	Candidates E, B, A
12.30–1.30	Lunch	
1.30–3.00	In-tray exercise	All
3.00–3.30	Coffee	
3.30–4.00	One-to-one interviews (30 mins each)	Candidates F, D, E

Figure 7.1
An example of the scheduling of events – based on an assessment centre for a professional post (central government)

Note: Based on six candidates (A, B, C, D, E, F) and three assessors.

A matrix is usually developed to show how the required competencies and the activities link up together. In terms of running the centre sufficient well-trained assessors will be needed, usually based on the ratio of one assessor for two candidates to ensure that the assessor can observe each candidate sufficiently carefully. Lists of competencies and associated behaviours will need to be drawn up as checklists and a careful plan will need to be made of how each candidate will move around the different activities – an example of which is found in Figure 7.1. Clearly candidates will need to be very well briefed both before and at the start of the centre.

At the end of the procedure the assessors have to come to agreement on a cumulative rating for each individual, related to job requirements, taking into account all the selection activities. The procedure as a whole can then be validated against job performance rather than each separate activity. The predictive validities from such procedures are not very consistent, but there is a high 'face validity' – a feeling that this is a fairer way of selecting people. Reliability can also be improved by the quality of assessor training, careful briefing of assessors and a predetermined structured approach to marking. The chief disadvantages of these selection methods are that they are a costly and time-consuming procedure, for both the organisation and the candidates. The time commitment is extended by the need to give some feedback to candidates who have been through such a long procedure which involves psychological assessment – although feedback is still not always available for candidates. There is evidence of increasing use of assessment centres and CIPD (2003) reports that 47.5 per cent of organistaions in its survey used such centres for selection. Some organisations have been improving their centres (*see* IRS 2002d) by making the activities more connected or by using longer simulations or scenarios which are a reflection of real-life experience on the job, and are carrying out testing separately

from the centre. Some are assessing candidates against the values of the company rather than a specific job, in view of the rapid change in the nature of jobs, and others, such as Britvic, are running a series of assessment centres which candidates must attend, rather than only one. A helpful text relating competency profiles and assessment centre activities is Woodruffe (2000) and IDS (2002) provides examples of different company experiences.

Work sampling/portfolios

Work sampling of potential candidates for permanent jobs can take place by assessing candidates' work in temporary posts or on government training schemes in the same organisation. For some jobs, such as photographers and artists, a sample of work in the form of a portfolio is expected to be presented at the time of interview. Kanter (1989) suggests that managers and professionals should also be developing portfolios of their work experiences and achievements as one way of enhancing their employability.

References

One way of informing the judgement of managers who have to make employment offers to selected individuals is the use of references. Candidates provide the names of previous employers or others with appropriate credentials and then prospective employers request them to provide information. Reference checking is increasing as organisations react to scandals in the media and aim to protect themselves from rogue applicants (IRS 2002e). There are two types: the factual check and the character reference.

The factual check

The factual check is fairly straightforward as it is no more than a confirmation of facts that the candidate has presented. It will normally follow the employment interview and decision to offer a post. It simply confirms that the facts are accurate. The knowledge that such a check will be made – or may be made – will help focus the mind of candidates so that they resist the temptation to embroider their story.

The character reference

The character reference is a very different matter. Here the prospective employer asks for an opinion about the candidate before the interview so that the information gained can be used in the decision-making phases. The logic of this strategy is impeccable: who knows the working performance of the candidate better than the previous employer? The wisdom of the strategy is less sound, as it depends on the writers of references being excellent judges of working performance, faultless communicators and – most difficult of all – disinterested. The potential inaccuracies of decisions influenced by character references begin when the candidate decides who to cite. They will have some freedom of choice and will clearly choose someone from whom they expect favourable comment, perhaps massaging the critical faculties with such comments as: 'I think references are going to be very important for this job' or 'You will do your best for me, won't you?'

Other methods

A number of other less conventional methods such as physiognomy, phrenology, body language, palmistry, graphology and astrology have been suggested as possible selection methods. While these are fascinating to read about there is little evidence to suggest that they could be used effectively. Thatcher (1997) suggests that the use of graphology is around 10 per cent in Holland and Germany and that it is regularly used in France; in the UK he found nine per cent of small firms (with fewer than 100 employees), one per cent of medium-sized firms (100–499 employees) and five per cent of larger firms used graphology as a selection method. In 1990 Fowler suggested that the extent of use of graphology is much higher in the UK than reported figures indicate, as there is some reluctance on the part of organisations to admit that they are using graphology for selection purposes. There are also concerns about the quality of graphologists – who can indeed set themselves up with no training whatsoever. The two main bodies in this field in the UK are the British Institute of Graphology and the International Graphology Association and both these organisations require members to gain qualifications before they can practise.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

It is interesting to contrast different approaches to selection in different countries. Bulois and Shackleton (1996) note that interviews are the cornerstone of selection activity in both Britain and France, but that they are consciously used in different ways. In Britain they argue that interviews are increasingly structured and criterion referenced, whereas in France the approach tends to be deliberately unstructured and informal. They note that in France the premise is that 'the more at ease the candidates are, the higher the quality of their answer', whereas in Britain they characterise the premise as 'the more information you get about an individual, the better you know him/her and the more valid and reliable your judgement is' (p. 129). Tixier (1996), in a survey covering the EU (but excluding France), Switzerland, Sweden and Austria, found that structured interviews were favoured in the UK, Scandinavia, Germany and Austria. This contrasted with Italy, Portugal, Luxembourg and Switzerland where unstructured styles were preferred.

Bulois and Shackleton identify selectors in Britain as more aware of the limitations of interviews and as attempting to reduce the subjectivity by also carrying out assessment centres and psychological tests; whereas in France these methods were identified as unnatural, tedious and frustrating. Interviews are much more likely to be supplemented by handwriting analysis in France – both methods being identified as valuable, flexible and cheap sources of information. Shackleton and Newell (1991) report that handwriting analysis was used in 77 per cent of the organisations that they surveyed in France compared with 2.6 per cent of the organisations they surveyed in the UK.

Both culture and employment legislation clearly have an influence on the selection methods adopted in any country and the way in which they are used.

ACTIVITY 7.5

Design an assessment centre for the anti-rape detective job as described in case 7.1 on the website.

FINAL SELECTION DECISION MAKING

The selection decision involves measuring each candidate against the selection criteria defined in the person specification, and not against each other. A useful tool to achieve this is the matrix in Figure 7.2. This is a good method of ensuring that every candidate is assessed against each selection criterion and in each box in the matrix the key details can be completed. The box can be used whether a single selection method was used or multiple methods. If multiple methods were used and contradictory information is found against any criterion, this can be noted in the decision-making process.

When more than one selector is involved there is some debate about how to gather and use the information and judgement of each selector. One way is for each selector to assess the information collected separately, and then for all selectors to meet to discuss assessments. When this approach is used, there may be some very different assessments, especially if the interview was the only selection method used. Much heated and time-consuming debate can be generated, but the most useful aspect of this process is sharing the information in everyone's matrix to understand how judgements have been formed. This approach is also helpful in training interviewers.

An alternative approach is to fill in only one matrix, with all selectors contributing. This may be quicker, but the drawback is that the quietest member may be the one who has all the critical pieces of information. There is a risk that all the information may not be contributed to the debate in progress. Iles (1992), referring to assessment centre decisions, suggests that the debate itself may not add to the quality of the decision, and that taking the results from each selector and combining them is just as effective.

Selection criteria	***Candidate 1***	***Candidate 2***	***Candidate 3***	***Candidate 4***
Criterion a				
Criterion b				
Criterion c				
Criterion d				
Criterion e				
General comments				

Figure 7.2 A selection decision-making matrix

VALIDATION OF SELECTION PROCEDURES

We have already mentioned how test scores may be validated against eventual job performance for each individual in order to discover whether the test score is a good predictor of success in the job. In this way we can decide whether the test should be used as part of the selection procedure. The same idea can be applied to the use of other individual or combined selection methods.

The critical information that is important for determining validity is the selection criteria used, the selection processes used, an evaluation of the individual at the time of selection and current performance of the individual.

Unfortunately we are never in a position to witness the performance of rejected candidates and compare this with those we have employed. However, if a group of individuals are selected at the same time, for example, graduate trainees, it will be unlikely that they were all rated equally highly in spite of the fact that they were all considered employable. It is useful for validation purposes if a record is made of the scores that each achieved in each part of the selection process. Test results are easy to quantify, and for interview results a simple grading system can be devised.

Current performance includes measures derived from the job description, together with additional performance measures:

1. **Measures from the job description:** quantitative measures such as volume of sales, accuracy, number of complaints and so on may be used, or qualitative measures such as relations with customers and quality of reports produced.
2. **Other measures:** these may include appraisal results, problems identified, absence data and, of course, termination.

Current performance is often assessed in an intuitive, subjective way, and while this may sometimes be useful it is no substitute for objective assessment.

Selection ratings for each individual can be compared with eventual performance over a variety of time periods. Large discrepancies between selection and performance ratings point to further investigation of the selection criteria and methods used. The comparison of selection rating and performance rating can also be used to compare the appropriateness of different selection criteria, and the usefulness of different selection methods.

ACTIVITY 7.6

How would you validate the selection process for the anti-rape detective job as described in case 7.1 on the website?

SUMMARY PROPOSITIONS

7.1 Selection is a two-way process. The potential employer and the potential employee both make selection decisions.

7.2 A combination of selection methods is usually chosen, based upon the job, appropriateness, acceptability, time, administrative ease, cost, accuracy and the abilities of the selection staff. Different countries often have a different view on which methods are most appropriate.

7.3 The most well-used selection methods are application forms, interviews (including those conducted by video and telephone), tests, group selection procedures, assessment centres and references.

7.4 A procedure for selection decision making needs to be agreed which can integrate all the selection information available.

7.5 Selection methods should be validated. A simple system is better than no system at all.

GENERAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

1 It could be argued that the selection process identifies candidates who are competent in the selection process rather than candidates who are most competent to perform the job on offer. Discuss this in relation to all forms of selection.

2 'It is unethical and bad for business to make candidates undergo a selection assessment centre without providing detailed feedback and support.' Discuss.

FURTHER READING

International Journal of Selection and Assessment, Vol. 11, No. 2/3, June/September 2003
This is a special edition of the journal and it is devoted to the role of technology in shaping the future of staffing and assessment. Contains some highly relevant articles, including, for example, using technology in the recruiting, screening and selection process; applicant and recruiter reactions to technology; internet-based personality testing and privacy in internet-based selection systems.

IRS (2002) 'Of good character: supplying references and providing access', *Employment Review*, No. 754, 24 June, pp. 34–6
Second of a two-part series on references – this one concentrating on providing references and employee access to references about them. Useful to read this in conjunction with No. 752, 27 May, entitled 'The check's in the post' which focuses on the legal position and on the content and nature of references.

Strudwick, L. (2002) *Training for Assessment Centres*. Aldershot: Gower
A good resource pack, although expensive. Includes the development of exercises, roles of assessors, competencies, the nature of evidence, observation and recording techniques, planning and organising the centre.

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An extensive range of additional materials, including multiple choice questions, answers to questions and links to useful websites can be found on the Human Resource Management Companion Website at **www.pearsoned.co.uk/torrington**.