

CONSULTANTS' SHOWCASE

APPLYING THE ASSESSMENT CENTER METHOD TO SELECTION INTERVIEWING

BY RICHARD A. DAPRA
AND WILLIAM C. BYHAM

Over 2,000 organizations throughout the world use the assessment-center method to identify individuals with supervisory, managerial, sales, and technical potential. The accuracy of the method has been proven in a number of research studies.^{1,2,3} However, less than 20 organizations make extensive use of the assessment-center method for initial selection. For most organizations, the process represents too great an investment of personnel and financial resources. Only very large organizations, such as Sears, AT&T, and S.C. Johnson, have the volume of candidates at any one time that allows the efficient and cost-effective operation of a conventional assessment-center program as part of an on-going selection system.

"Targeted Selection," developed by Development Dimensions International, applies all the essential elements of the assessment-center process to initial selection decisions. It provides an organization with the opportunity to obtain the fairness, accuracy, and job-relatedness of the assessment-center method in situations where it would be impractical to use conventional assessment-center methodology.

All five elements on which the validity of the assessment-center method is based are present in

Targeted Selection. They are:

1. the use of job-related target dimensions;
2. the use of behavior to predict behavior;
3. the organization of selection elements into a coherent and integrated system;
4. the involvement of several managers in an organized discussion of candidates; and
5. the use of behavioral simulations to produce examples of behavior.

Job-Related Target Dimensions

Targeted Selection derives its name from targeting selection interviews and all other elements of the selection process to job-related dimensions such as "technical competency," "initiative," "planning," and "sales ability." This focusing of efforts produces a more valid, fair and efficient selection process because time and energy is spent only on obtaining information that is related to job performance.

Just as managers involved in an assessment center know exactly what dimensions they are seeking, so do managers conducting a Targeted Selection interview. In both cases, the managers are trained in the explicit definitions of the dimensions being sought. This insures that they are seeking the correct information, increases the accuracy of communication among the managers involved in the selection decision, and produces maxi-

mum reliability of judgments.

The dimensions sought are obtained from a comprehensive, legally defensible, documented job analysis. They represent categories of the most important behaviors leading to success or failure in the target job. The job analysis procedure is the first step in establishing the job relatedness of a selection system and follows the direction provided by Chief Justice Burger of the United States Supreme Court to use only job-related measurements in making hiring or promotion decisions.⁴

Targeted Selection insures that a comprehensive and easily understandable definition for each dimension is provided. In addition, examples of job-related behavior are provided to illustrate what behaviors are being sought. This is the only way to assure that all managers involved in the selection system are seeking the same thing.

In assessment centers, managers observe and evaluate behavior generated by a series of simulations. Behavior identified in the simulations is used as a basis for predicting future performance. The assumption is made that if a person shows good planning and organization in a series of exercises then that person will show equally good planning and organization when confronted with similar situations on the job.

For years, managers have used behavior to predict behavior. When there is trouble in a unit of an organization, top management seeks a person with a history of successfully rectifying past trouble situations. Top management makes the assumption that if the individual could do it in the past, he/she can do it again. Although the background interview is the key place to obtain examples of past behavior in the selection setting, many managers fail to capitalize on the opportunity. They may not try (as when they take a psychoanalytic approach to interviewing) or they may just find it so difficult to elicit behavior that they give up. To be an effective interviewer a manager must learn how to solicit examples of behavior, reliably categorize that behavior by dimensions, and reliably evaluate the categorized behavior relative to predicted future job performance.

Targeted Selection also uses behavior to predict behavior, but the principal source of behavior is the

candidate's past experience. A Targeted Selection interview concentrates on obtaining examples of past behavior that are indicative of future behavior. If "problem analysis" is a targeted dimension, then the interviewer seeks past examples of successful or unsuccessful problem analysis in situations similar to those which will be faced on the job.

The benefits of focusing the selection interview and the selection system on behavior are threefold: (1) The process forces the interviewer to concentrate on real data. This keeps the interviewer from using extraneous and often legally unacceptable information in making hiring decisions. (2) It helps prevent the manager from becoming an "amateur psychiatrist." Behavior is less subject to interpretation than answers to projective questions such as "Tell me three strengths and three weaknesses about yourself." The manager is less likely to project his or her own motives and values on to the appli-

cant. (3) The process is easily understood and used by managers.

Obtaining Behavior

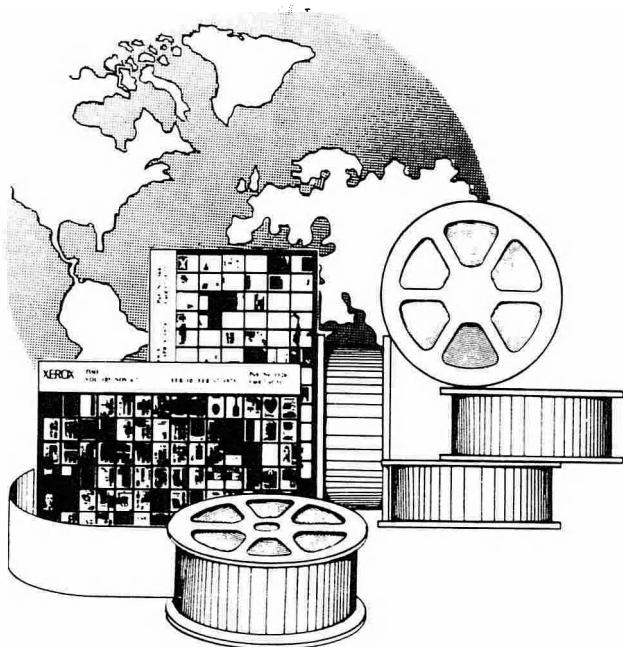
Improved questioning techniques are the key to obtaining behavior. In the Targeted Selection Training Program, managers are first trained to differentiate between good behavioral evidence and poor behavioral evidence. Then they are put through a series of skill-building experiences to develop behavioral questioning skills.

Targeted Selection emphasizes improved questioning techniques as the way to obtain better behavioral examples to use to predict future behavior. Three elements are involved: (1) asking good questions; (2) following up on questions to pin down actual behavior; and (3) determining the "why" behind the behavior so that the meaning of the behavior can be totally understood.

Although the Targeted Selection interview is highly structured, it must be individually planned and

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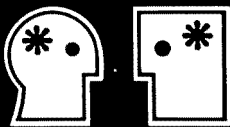
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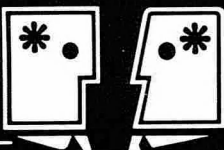
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designed to focus on the unique past experience of the applicant. Only by obtaining specific behavior from job-related activities can behavior predict behavior to any degree of accuracy.

Categorizing Behavior

Once behavior is obtained, managers must have the skill to reliably categorize that behavior by the target dimensions. After each exercise in an assessment center, the assessors take their observed behaviors and classify them relative to the dimensions being sought in the exercise. Similarly, after a Targeted Selection interview, the manager conducting the interview must take the behaviors obtained and classify those behaviors by the dimensions targeted for the interview.

The process of behavior categorization is extremely important if the interview behavior is to have maximum effect on a selection decision. Therefore, behavioral categorization is a skill emphasized in the program.

Managers often have markedly different standards against which to evaluate candidates. Some tend to be lenient in rating examples of behavior, some very demanding. In addition, evaluations of applicants often are adversely influenced by variables such as availability of candidates and pressure to fill a position. Managers often make decisions relative to a group of applicants rather than to job requirements. They find themselves "taking the best of the bad lot" rather than continuing their search to find a really appropriate candidate.

Both assessors in assessment centers and managers who conduct interviews are trained to establish common standards that they all agree upon for the evaluation of behavioral examples. Regardless of what system of evaluation is used, it is extremely important that managers use it reliably and that their judgments are not affected by outside pressures or by the availability of candidates. Thus, the development of standards is a key element of the training provided to the managers in a

Targeted Selection Training Program.

The assessment center itself is a system. Targeted dimensions are designated for observation in each simulation. Only planned overlap of dimensional observations is allowed. A well-designed assessment center is also part of a larger selection or development system in which its role is explicitly defined.

The typical interview process is seldom systematized. It is not uncommon for several managers to spend a considerable time interviewing an applicant and still know comparatively little about that applicant. For example, very often when an applicant is interviewed by four managers, the applicant does not really receive four different interviews. Instead, he/she repeats the same interview four times. All four managers tend to ask the same questions and make their judgments on the same restricted information. Similarly there is often considerable overlap and large voids in information-gathering when different sources of information about an applicant are considered. Some unimportant dimensions are evaluated in several parts of the system while other more important ones are missed entirely. In general, most organizations do not truly have a defined selection system; and if they do, all individuals involved in a selection system very often do not fully understand the system or their roles in the system.

A Targeted Selection System is well-defined and targeted to the specific job-related dimensions for the target position. It includes all sources of candidate information that can be obtained legally and practically. It also makes sure that the selection system is applied uniformly to all applicants. All interviewers do not interview for all the dimensions. The assignments of subsets of dimensions gives the interviewers more time to spend on their assigned dimensions rather than trying to spread out their questioning over all dimensions. Overlap of important dimensions in the coverage is planned — it does not occur by chance.

Whether an organization has a formal selection system or not, key managers involved in the decision usually meet to discuss who should or should not be hired. Traditionally, decisions are made by throwing out names followed by global observations about the people, e.g., "Joe seems like a good candidate," or, "I wasn't very impressed with Mary. She didn't have much on the ball." This type of group discussion is generally not beneficial because data are not fully shared, compared, and contrasted.

Management Involvement

In Targeted Selection, as in an assessment center, the managers involved in the selection decision meet to discuss each applicant who reaches the end of the selection system. One applicant at a time is discussed. Each manager presents behavioral evidence to the other managers to support his/her rating on each job-related dimension. Only behavioral data are accepted. Differences in observations are thoroughly explored and a consensus decision is made on each dimension. After all the dimensions have been discussed and a profile of the individual's strengths and weaknesses for the dimensions has been developed, an overall evaluation is made.

The Targeted Selection discussion process encourages managers to delay making an overall decision about an applicant until all managers meet to discuss the applicant. Managers know that their job during the integration discussion will be to report on the dimensions observed, not to report an overall judgment. Thus, they focus their interviews on getting information on assigned dimensions. The discussion process also delays decision-making. Each manager reports his/her behavioral observations on each targeted dimension. Then each dimension is discussed and a consensus reached on each. Only after all dimensions have been discussed do the managers look at the resulting profiles and make a decision. Thus, the final decision is delayed until all data on all dimensions are thoroughly considered. Research studies have shown that delaying decisions until all the

facts are thoroughly considered produces more accurate decisions.

This procedure overcomes or minimizes many of the common interviewing problems, particularly those that involve deep-seated, hard-to-change facets of human nature. The impact of biases and stereotypes is lessened through emphasis on the collection and recording of actual behavior. When managers meet to share observations on an applicant, they must substantiate their evaluations with examples of observed behavior. It is the fact that evaluations must be substantiated that decreases the effect of biases and stereotypes. If stereotypes never have to be defended, they can be maintained with impunity. The Targeted Selection discussion process reveals biases and stereotypes to both the interviewer and to the other managers involved by exposing unsubstantiated conclusions about a candidate.

Fluctuality standards resulting from pressure to fill a position or differences in applicant population are lessened by the fact that Targeted Selection judgments involve several people. This helps to maintain standards. While pressure may be on one person, there is usually another to say "Stop — do we really want this person? Would you have hired him/her last year when we had a lot of candidates?"

An option provided in Targeted Selection programs is the use of behavioral simulations like the ones used in an assessment center to supplement the data obtained from interviews and other sources of information about a candidate. Often, individuals are being considered for positions that require behaviors which they have never had the opportunity to show in their past jobs or experiences. This is particularly true when relatively young candidates who have spent most of their lives in educational settings are being interviewed. Finding past behavior to relate to future behavior can often be very difficult. In these situations, and in situations where individuals are making a job shift to a completely different field, it is often advisable to supplement

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background data with one or two behavioral simulations that provide specific data on dimensions that are hard to obtain. For example, a candidate for a sales position might be asked to make a demonstration sales presentation as part of the selection process. For such a simulation to be a valid part of a selection system, it must be carefully designed and administered and it must require behavior which is obviously job-related. Organizations using a Targeted Selection System have the option of using behavioral simulations to supplement the background interview portions of their system.

Targeted Selection Training Program

Managers can be trained to use the first four key principles of Targeted Selection in a three-day workshop. The workshop can be extended for an optional fourth or even fifth day if training on the use of a behavioral simulation is provided.

Skill - building is achieved through the use of interaction modeling techniques.⁵ The techniques include a step-by-step guide to planning and conducting an interview, a positive model of how an interview should be conducted, and two opportunities to practice the method and to receive feedback on that practice. Models are provided through two films. One film shows a model of an effective interview and also provides an opportunity for participants to practice behavioral note taking during an interview. A set of five short film vignettes are used to emphasize key interviewing concepts such as the importance of well-planned questions, effective follow-up of questions, appropriate legal phrasing of questions, and the use of reflective techniques.

The two practice interviews that are a part of each program are unique in a number of ways. Real applicants are used for the practice interviews. They are told that the

interviewers are involved in a training program to improve interviewing skills, but they are also told that the managers are actually looking for applicants (if that is the case) and that the practice applicants may be scheduled for follow-up interviews based on initial good impressions made in the training program interviews. The use of real applicants provides an appropriate "set" for both the interviewers and the interviewees and adds a great deal of realism to the program. The reality of the interviewing task is further enhanced when teams of interviewers are asked to report on different candidates and to recommend whether they should be followed up. Participants in the three-day workshop are trained in how to give and receive feedback relative to the practice interview. Modeling films, practice exercises, and observation forms are used to assure that the practice interview provide the maximum learning experience.

Development of confidence is also a goal of the program. A manager who is sure of his/her interviewing skills will be more relaxed, be able to concentrate more on the content of the interview, and enjoy the process more. Confidence is built by providing a series of organized success experiences for the participants. Positive reinforcement is emphasized. Negative feedback is provided only by providing examples of "alternate positive behaviors" that the interviewer can use next time.

Many individual and group exercises are used to assure learning and to provide individual skill practice in areas such as effective working of questions, the use of reflective techniques to encourage applicants to amplify on an answer, the recognition of illegal questions, and the appropriate legal phrasing of questions.

Experimental methods rather than lectures are used to show the need for having a selection system

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and the advantages of the Targeted Selection data integration discussion process. Program participants see the advantages of these procedures, they are not just told about them. Then they get to work on strategy for implementing the ideas in their own on-the-job selection system.

A Targeted Selection Manual is provided each participant in the program. The manual, which completely covers all aspects of the selection process, is designed as a reference document for participants to use after the program, in addition to providing examples and support information during the program.

Considered in the preceding are the five reasons for the validity of the assessment - center method along with a parallel list of reasons for the validity of Targeted Selection.

As can be seen, Targeted Selection has almost every advantage of the assessment-center method except the use of multiple exercises to generate behavior. (Targeted Selection Systems can be run with no behavioral exercises or, at the most, use one or two behavioral simulations.) Thus, it would appear that most of the reasons assessment centers are valid would also apply to Targeted Selection.

Targeted Selection provides practical solutions to many of the complex problems faced by managers responsible for hiring decisions. The key elements (dimensional targets, behavioral interviewing, a systematic and consistent interviewing system, and the integration of data) are combined in a program that assures more carefully considered, higher quality hiring decisions.

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Richard A. Dapra and William C. Byham are members of the management team at Development Dimensions International. Mr. Dapra serves as vice president and Mr. Byham is the organization's president.

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