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Role-playing in assessment centres

Assessment centres have a long and respectable heritage in recruitment and selection. Pioneered in the military and the public sector, they are one of the most effective ways to get a well-rounded view of potential job candidates.

But they can be long-winded and expensive and sometimes the exercises can lack a sense of realism. I once spent three days on an officer selection course for the army. In one of the interviews with an army officer he noticed that I had listed sport among my interests on the application form. Quite out of the blue, he said: "What's your handicap?"

I thought he meant physical handicap. They did not have a handicapping system at my local pitch-and-put course and I had never played a round of golf in my life. But then I bet this officer had never kicked a tin can between two dustbins for goals. The problem was that our different backgrounds made it difficult to find anything we had in common.

Last week I had the opportunity to look at a different style of assessment centre using role-play, in which trained actors take the part of colleagues, customers or suppliers in the kind of situations and conversations that office managers must confront every day.

The centre, at a hotel in Bournemouth, was run by Visions Consulting, part of the Credits Group of Companies, an actor co-operative, on behalf of Liverpool Victoria, a financial services company and the UK's largest friendly society.

Visions has been running these centres for about seven years. "We began as a group of actors who shared a desire to take control of their work. Much of the acting profession is like a closed shop and we wanted to create more opportunities for each other," says Greg Miller, managing director of Visions. Seven years later, the business appears to have succeeded in creating what could be described as a sustainable employment model for the future.

The actors are not only extending their field of employment, but are also learning transferable skills and building on their repertoire.

The business was launched when Mr Miller, a musician in a London rock band, teamed up with Adam Armstrong, a drama teacher and Visions' operations director, in the late 1990s and began to offer actors for role-playing, originally in assessing sales staff for financial services companies. In the early days the role-playing scenarios were designed by management consultants who pulled in the actors as and when they were needed.

"This was before one of our clients asked us why he was paying for all these consultants when we, as actors, appeared to have all the qualities he needed. As he pointed out, actors have a fundamental grounding in the observation of behaviours in people. That's our job," says Mr Miller.

Today the Vision consultants have moved beyond their acting brief, developing various simulations, carrying out and interpreting psychometric tests and assessing candidates themselves. "We still work closely with occupational psychologists but

now we run the whole assessment centre from start to finish," adds Mr Miller.

All the simulations at the Bournemouth assessment day involved the kind of scenarios a manager or team leader could find themselves experiencing in the jobs for which they were being assessed. Liverpool Victoria is undergoing a reorganisation in which staff are having to apply for new posts.

"I actually don't like the term assessment. It creates the feeling that you are being judged and no one likes to be judged," Mr Armstrong told the candidates. "None of us has ever been a customer services manager or a product controller so what right have we to say you are right for the job? Our job is to put you through some exercises and feed back information to your line managers. We never use words in our reports like 'good' or 'bad'."

In the first simulation I was invited to witness, an actor is playing a contracted supplier of management information and analysis who has been falling down on the job. The candidate manager must tease out the problems in the supplier-client relationship and come up with some ideas to address them.

There are no pat answers to these problems. In fact it is easy for the candidate to be wrong-footed by the actor as he begins by complaining about a previous manager at the client company and the poor quality of information that has been fed through to his team. In this case the candidate tries to appease the supplier whereas a little more probing would have discovered that the supplier has a poor understanding of the client's business model and is out of his depth.

In another session, assessing a potential team leader, the candidate must interview a team member who has little interest in any of his colleagues but who is one of the hardest workers in the team and by far the most knowledgeable. The challenge is to discover what makes this team member tick and to explore whether his hidden talent could be useful to the rest of his colleagues.

"In this simulation people often want to get him to socialise with everyone else and this is the last thing he wants to do," says Mr Miller. "I have seen interviews where this character visibly shrinks in front of the candidate because he is being urged to adopt a style of behaviour in which he feels extremely uncomfortable. Part of the exercise is to help candidates understand that different styles of management need to be adopted with different people."

What makes these situations so revealing is their authenticity and sophistication. The candidates are dealing with real people and the kind of work-related issues that they can expect to face every day in their jobs. After the sessions the role-player discusses the candidate's responses with an assessor - another of the Vision consultants who has been taking notes during the session. The notes will be used to provide feedback for Liverpool Victoria's managers.

An important feature of these sessions is that they are independent from the employing company so there is no danger that a view of a candidate could be coloured by any factors other than their performance in the assessment.

Aside from the processes, however, the real difference between these assessments and others I have witnessed is the people. The actors put the "human" back into "human resources". They understand the uncertainty surrounding so many jobs in today's workplaces. Indeed, the business works on a "virtual" networked model,

bringing various associates and psychologists together.

There should be more of this role-mixing in the workplace. In this case, the acting experience lends a richness to what can sometimes appear a sterile and clinical process. The genuine warmth of the actors is communicated to the candidates who are quickly put at their ease. The actors benefit too, finding new avenues for their talents and a structure that can be missing from their careers.

*www.visionsconsulting.co.uk

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