Selection and assessment methods used in work organisations

Selection and assessment techniques play a vital role in the recruitment of individuals. The contemporary world of work has been ever changing, creating room for personnel re-organisation and staff turnover. Since, the idea of working in the same organisation for life has become out-dated, people tend to polish themselves and their careers by switching jobs, enhancing skills and making themselves valuable. This great change in the world of work has put extreme pressure on organisations, recruitment agencies and human resource professionals. Recruitment decisions are based on hiring the best person for the job while predicting their future behaviours. Ed Michaels, Helen and Beth (2001) in their book ' war for talent' explain how there is a great need to recruit and retain talented individuals, they describe how organisations should ' think' because talent is very important for the success of any organisation.

There are various methods of selection and assessment. This paper will examine three major methods used by organisations today; bio-data forms, interview and psychometric testing. When using any selection method, it is important to factor what type of information it is going to yield, so smart decisions can be made. Hence, these methods need to be valid, reliable, fair, cost-effective and acceptable by candidates. Below, all methods discussed would be described in the light of these factors. The later part of the paper, will discuss the weaknesses of these methods in comparison with assessment centres (AC), each method would be discussed in detail.

Research suggests that there is a difference between what professionals recommend and what actually happens in organisations (Fincham, 1999). There is a serious gap and organisations fail to use popular scientific

methods to make selection decisions. Rynes, Colbert and Brown (2002) in their findings highlight that organisational seniors have a vague idea about selection and assessment techniques. They also emphasize on the few most common misunderstandings about selection processes for example; unstructured interviews provide better information compared to structured interviews. Since there is a lack of knowledge about scientific assessment methods, most of them are not used in organisations. An example of this is seen greatly in developing countries like Pakistan. In Pakistan, where occupational psychology is just an emerging concept many companies are not aware of the technical and difficult to understand concepts of selection. Most local companies, hire on the basis of references, CV, and unstructured interview.

Dr. Elaine D. Pulakos in her book ' selection and assessment methods' mentions ' more organizations do not use effective assessments may be attributable to the multitude of consulting firms selling different selection products and tools. It is important for organizational decision makers and HR practitioners to be educated consumers regarding these products to ensure they are bringing competently developed and effective assessment methods into their organizations.' (Pulakos, 2005)(p. 2).

Selection and Assessment methods are increasingly gaining popularity as organisations understand that their greatest assets are their people. Below are the most commonly used selection and assessment methods.

Interviews are a social ritual in which job applicants answer questions asked by an assessor. This method is used to predict future behaviours, investigate

previous experiences and ask related questions. They mostly focus on description of work experience, image of one's personality, accomplishments and applicant reactions to job related hypothetical situations. There are many types of interviews; structured, unstructured, one-on one, behavioural and panel. Interview techniques date back to the 1930s when Raphael, 1944 (as mentioned in the book Assessment Methods in Recruitment, Selection and Performance by Robert Edenborough) published his work which was a reflection of the last 10 years of work on interviews. Even though, interviewing techniques date back to the 1930s the developments in the area are relatively recent. David Morgan (1993) said that the focus group style was unknown to scientists five years ago.

In any selection practice the tools used need to be validated by analysing how effectively they predict an applicant's future job performance. Unstructured interviews which follow no particular pattern are generally regarded as low. Despite that unstructured interviews are not very reliable or valid, and are subjective are still used as a selection method by organisations (Pulakos, 2005; Stephen Dakin, 1989). Unstructured interviews follow the concept that a casual, unrestrained face-to face conversation is used as a technique for selection. This idea is concerning when the organisation solely relies on this method for selection. Hence, raises the issue of validity and also the fact that certain people perfect their skills of ' first impressions' and can unfairly get a job they don't rightfully deserve. Such interviews have low validity also because of the difference in interviewers, if there is no set criterion of assessing then different interviewers would interpret the same information differently. Also, physical

appearances, age, race, sex, basic demographics, experience can influence the interviewers decisions.

Structured interviews are based on a pattern or a process by carefully understanding the job analysis. There are many different kinds of structured interviews; critical incident technique, competency based interviews; criterion based interviews, situational interviews and patterned behavioural description interview. (Edenborough) Critical incident technique by Flanagan (1954) uses experts to point out important factors about significant processes and then questions are structured accordingly. A detailed thorough job analysis would also help in pointing out the relevant behaviours required. This technique has given rise to situational interviews and patterned behavioural description interview. In situational interviews interviewees respond to hypothetical situations related to the job setting. Patterned behavioural description interview asks interviewees about their actual experiences. Competency based interviews highlight the competencies required for the job and questions are shaped accordingly. A competency is defined as ' an underlying characteristic of a person that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job or role.' (Edenborough). Criterion based interviews seek to explore evidence of desired behaviours.

Structured interviews are objective as they use a previously designed scoring system. The nature of these interviews standardise the procedure by eliminating biases, also forms a link between the interview context and job success. Structured interviews are higher in validity, are objective and can assess critical skills that are required for the job. (Campion, 1997; Judge,

2000). Structured interviews are mostly used to assess skills like planning, interpersonal skills, confidence, organising, adaptability, communication skills, leadership among many others (Pulakos, 2005). These interviews help in increasing the quality and effectiveness of the information provided and are widely used across organisations for selection purposes.

The British Psychological Society defines psychometric tests as ' any procedure on the basis of which inferences are made concerning a person's capacity, propensity or liability to act, react, experience, or to structure or order thought or behaviour in particular ways' (Society). Psychometric tests are standardised methods of assess an applicant's personality, intelligence, aptitude and other mental abilities. These tests are standardised because the results are compared to a large sample group which usually comprises of people from all over the world, different cultures and various age groups. These tests are high on validity, reliability and costs. There are various kinds of tests used by organisations today, most commonly used are 16PF, five factor personality, cognitive tests, aptitude tests and tests which measure the ability to learn and prior knowledge. Psychometric testing can be expensive and is usually the last on the priority list of organisations. Some tests require a consultant to interpret results which can increase costs of administering these tests. It is also essential that participants receive feedback on these tests to increase the acceptability of such methods, and to increase their understanding of the selection process. Test publishers could not be open about data relating to equal opportunities and this could be a negative impact of tests on minority groups (Bureau). There is legal regulation when using psychometric tests, it is there to avoid discrimination.

Many developed countries like the United States and Britain follow strict regulatory guidelines in order to avoid litigation. The Data Protection Act requires the participant to access its own data like test results, hence feedback on these tests is very important. Such guidelines eliminate the possibility of direct or indirect discrimination, special care is offered to people with disabilities which is very uncommon in developing countries. According to Andrew Jenkins (2001) the use of tests has been growing since the 1980s. He suggests that larger organisations use these tests because they have more vacancies which reduces the costs and large organisations is also likely to have staff that is trained in psychometric testing (Jenkins, 2001). Psychometric testing has objectivity as it reduces biases and personal perspectives. Test results can provide a clear picture, since most tests are standardised there is equality and fairness in this method. Psychometric testing increases the level of predictive validity as it effectively predicts future performance. Test results can also highlight training needs and encourage organisations to thoroughly conduct job analysis so the applicants are being assessed for only the skills required for the job (University).

The procedure of examining and previewing application forms for a job is often assisted by the use of biographical data, or ' bio-data'. This is a much more objective substitute to the conventional ' paper sift' method of pre-selection and has proven to be an effective predictor of job performance (Stokes, 1994; Shoenfeldt, 1999). Bio-data allows an applicant to describe themselves in terms of demographic, experiential, or attitudinal variables assumed or established to be related to personality structure, personal adjustment or success in social, educational or occupational interests

(Hough, 1984). Items may range from objective features such as date of birth, examination successes, positions of distinction in previous jobs, through to questions that resemble those that might be asked in a personality test, such as ideal characteristics of jobs. Bio-data is used to a certain extent in most selection processes regardless of the position being applied for. One of the most basic uses of bio-data is pre-screening in relation to prior job information or examination results, which server to provide a minimum standard for applicants. This can increase up to very complex scales, usually of more than a hundred items. The use of bio-data presumes that the way a person has responded in certain situations in the past is a reliable source of information on how that individual will react to similar situations in the future (Hough L. K., 1983).

With an increase in coaching, applications have become more and more alike. Sometimes applicants may appear the same on paper, but some have greater enterprise or people skills than others. Bio-data (biographical data) forms have been made to identify non-academic behaviors such as these. Bio-data comprises of systematic information about hobbies, interests and life history. The major use of bio-data is in the pre-selection of low-level jobs such as apprentices or graduate trainees. The logic is that if candidates are matched with present staff, people with similar interests can be found who are likely to be appropriate for the job. The greatest value of the techniques is its capability to decrease staff turnover.

Selection and assessment methods can greatly influence the processes, productivity and quality of the recruitment process. There are many misunderstandings about the selection methods and every method has its

pros and cons. The area of selection and assessment is difficult to understand and is fairly technical, hence requires professionals in the area to manage tasks, which organisations do not favour. The unfavourableness of these methods has led to the under-utilization of formal assessments like psychometric tests in organisations (Pulakos, 2005). The methods discussed above are being used by many organisations today and hopefully by future advancements in literature this area will be clearer, understandable and advanced to recruit and retain the best people for the jobs being offered.

An assessment centre is defined as a process which involves various techniques and multiple assessors to evaluate the extent to which a participant matches with the required abilities (method, 2000). The functions of an assessment centre are that it ' An assessment centre consists of a standardized evaluation of behaviour based on multiple inputs. Several trained observers and techniques are used. Judgments about behaviour are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations. These judgments are pooled in a meeting among the assessors or by a statistical integration process. In an integration discussion, comprehensive accounts of behaviour, and often ratings of it, are pooled. The discussion results in evaluations of the performance of the assessees on the dimensions/ competencies or other variables that the assessment centre is designed to measure. Statistical combination methods should be validated in accordance with professionally accepted standards' (method, 2000). Assessment centres include various exercises including psychometric testing, interviews, simulation exercises etc. Assessment centres are preferred to other selection methods (Misra). They have many advantages

and disadvantages. ACs tend to incorporate challenging tasks in simulation exercises which raises the validity of the assessment tool. These tools help organisations by developing their participants, when people perform in teams they reflect on other's actions and ability of thinking which highlights different ways of looking at a problem. This process makes participants reflect on their own performance which automatically raises the credibility of the selection process. ACs can be designed to cater to many reasons; different jobs, different competencies, different organisational requirements etc. ACs usually provides training for participants and assessors which can be beneficial for the organisation. Assessors need to be trained properly because biases, prejudices and personal perceptions can influence evaluation. ACs are a costly method for selection and very time consuming. The way in which feedback is provided is also vital because poor performers can lose confidence and suffer from of low self-esteem (Misra).

ACs reduces some of the factors that reduce the credibility of selection methods mentioned above. Interviews as discussed above have a few advantages for the organisations. Anderson and Shackleton (Anderson, 1993) in their work mention disadvantages of interviews, these reasons are mostly the factors that affect the aforementioned selection methods and make them less credible;

Self-fulfilling prophecy effect in which interviewers ask questions to get desired answers. In ACs the self-prophecy effect can be eliminated as many people go through the assessment centre together and all questions and answers are open to everyone's knowledge to decide and judge if it was fair

or not. Assessors at ACs can also keep this factor in mind and evaluate accordingly.

Stereotyping effect in which interviewers associate certain features/characteristics to a certain group like age, sex, disability, marital status etc. ACs are a medium where there are multiple people double checking your actions and reactions. Also, these centres are made to cater to many people at the same time so individual changes to any form of assessment due to stereotyping does not occur.

Halo and horns effect in which interviewers rate candidates as good or poor across the board, presenting a very vague picture of the candidates potential. ACs have trained assessors who rate people based on thoroughly explained behaviours, the observations give a clear picture of the behaviours shown. In my experience of designing assessment centres, to eliminate this aspect I made sure all assessors rotated between participants so there were multiple observations from different people to draw conclusions from.

Contrast effect in which the experience of interviewing one candidate affects the way other interviews are conducted. For example; similar to me effect in which interviewers prefer candidates who seem similar to them in terms of educational history, work experience, interests, aspirations etc. Personal liking effect is also similar where interviewers evaluate based on personal liking or disliking.

Psychometric tests and bio data forms need to be constructed with thorough knowledge of the skills required of the job. Results in Psychometric tests can be different than actual potential for example; a person may have attempted

many personality tests before to know how to present himself/herself in the best light possible. Bio data forms can be faked for example; candidates mention skills and accomplishments they never achieved or get these forms filled by an expert. In ACs, the participants are in a competitive atmosphere and along with test results, their behaviors are being observed in simulation exercises. Final decisions after assessment centers are based on observed behavior and test results combines along with other factors of the selection process. The reason that candidates are put together to compete and display their potential gives a clearer picture of true potential compared to sometimes exaggerated view of oneself expressed on CVs and interviews.

Selection and Assessment techniques are used by many organisations to recruit the best people in the market. Though assessment centres are costly, they are the most beneficial in the long run. Companies like Rolls-Royce run assessment centres in which they use psychometric testing, case studies and interviews, Unilever runs a two tier assessment centre for graduates where they test candidates in competency based interviews, simulation exercises, case study interviews, group discussions etc. Organisations like BP conduct 24-hour assessments methods held over two days by using interviews, informal discussions and group exercises. Some organisations follow the fast pacing trends and some organisations restrict their selection methods according to their pockets. Over all, the process of selection and assessment of individuals is a difficult task and professionals who have the knowledge and expertise should conduct it. Assessment centres are proven to be the most effective method to select and assess people, the other

methods are also helpful when conducted as a part of the assessment centre programme.

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