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Assessment and Development Centres

Second Edition

Iain Ballantyne and Nigel Povah

A **Gower** Book

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IAIN BALLANTYNE and NIGEL POVAH

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Preface to the Second Edition

Since the first edition of *Assessment and Development Centres* was published in 1995, there have been a number of changes in the world of assessment centres which warrant significant revision and overhaul of the content of the chapters. Without question, one of the most significant practical changes over the past eight years is the use of computer-based technology. In many respects the things that we predicted have come to life, particularly when it comes to computers easing the administrative burden in assessment and development centres. In common with most aspects of life, the 'feel' of a centre is becoming more computer-based than paper-based. In another significant development, we are seeing some leading organisations move away from separate exercises to whole day simulations. Thus we have made revisions to the chapters dealing with exercise design, centre administration and the evolution of assessment centres.

In addition to these technology-related changes, we examine two key developments in recent academic research which have arisen from the explosion of interest in assessment centres over recent years. The first point of focus is about the ability of assessors to distinguish between criteria, within an exercise, which is about 'discriminant' versus 'convergent' validity and relates to the thorny subject of construct validity. The second, which has lead to substantial revision of Chapter 6, is the exploration of different training strategies and understanding how different assessors contribute to the accuracy of assessments.

There has also been enormous growth in interest in, and the use of, development centres since we wrote the first edition and this is reflected in a new, expanded Chapter 10. Finally, Chapter 11 points to emerging issues and trends and how these might impact on the future of assessment and development centres. The massively increased use of assessment and development centres within the UK has also led the British Psychological Society to produce a set of Best Practice Guidelines. These are reproduced as an appendix to this book with the kind permission of the British Psychological Society.

In conclusion, we would like to acknowledge our debt to Sarah Cook who has been part of our team for the last three years and for acting as our research assistant while she completes her MSc course.

Iain Ballantyne and Nigel Povah
January 2004

Preface to the First Edition

This book was born on a journey to York in the autumn of 1992, when we were both on the way to run an assessor training programme for a client. Between us we thought we must have delivered what is effectively the contents of this book to dozens of different audiences over the previous ten years. As practitioners we were well aware of a growing demand for knowledge in this important area of human resource activity, but equally unaware of a plain-language reference source.

Most of what we had learned about assessment centres was originally academic study for the MSc in Occupational Psychology at Birkbeck College, London. Following different career paths, Nigel Povah acquired most of his practical knowledge through working with an offshoot of DDI whilst at ICL; Iain Ballantyne learned his with colleagues from Inbucon, whose background was dominated by Boyatzis. It was clear to both of us that there was a need for a text which would directly address the needs of the practitioner.

This book is aimed at the manager in the human resource function who wishes to research the area and may be charged with the implementation of assessment or development centres for the first time in his or her career. We therefore envisage our audience as very much like the one we meet in consultancy assignments, so we have written with four purposes in mind:

- To establish a thorough understanding of the concepts and best practice standards.
- To provide sufficient knowledge of the practical issues to enable the person with some experience to run at least part of their own events, and do so well.
- To provide the reader with sufficient knowledge to recognise where they may not have sufficient skills available to them and, therefore, need to call on specific expertise.
- To enable the reader who is seeking to engage consultants for the first time to ask some pertinent questions of their prospective supplier.

Much as we would like it to be otherwise, there are consultants whose knowledge in this area is weak. Part of our motive is to support potential clients to ensure that they find people with high professional standards.

The text should also be useful to people who are studying for professional qualifications in human resource management, or as part of a wider programme such as an MBA or postgraduate qualifications in psychology. Finally, we hope that this book will interest the many line managers who are keen to find out more, after they have been involved in job analysis research and training as an assessor.

While the primary audience is the human resource practitioner, we hope that the book does not offend our academic colleagues. We have tried to identify the concerns where they exist without weighing down the content with continuous references to substantial pieces of text in the academic style. Where something can be said in the first or second person using the active voice, it is.

The format of the book follows the flow of a typical assignment from the point of first meeting our prospective client to the end-point of validating the work.

Chapter 1 introduces the main concepts and background history, and places the competency-based approach at the centre of the human resource strategy, while Chapter 2 helps the practitioner with both selling the concept and settling it within HR policy. Chapter 3 presents both a rationale for, and some of the common techniques used in, conducting a job or competency analysis, which leads logically to designing appropriate exercises in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 describes the main planning tasks required in bringing all the resources together which, together with the assessor training identified in Chapter 6, completes the work that runs up to the event. Chapter 7 examines the logistics of the event itself. Chapters 8 and 9 look at life after the event. In the short term, this is mainly a matter of writing up reports and arranging feedback to participants. In the longer term the main focus is on validating the centre, which needs to be planned for as the event is born.

We would like to thank and acknowledge our debt to the many people who have been our mentors and also our clients who have taught us much of what we know today. While it is always invidious to produce a shortlist, Mike van Oudtshoorn and the sadly departed Russell Wicks stand out among the mentors. Among our clients we would like to thank Bianca Kübler at ICL, Nick Dalton and more recently Pippa Reid at Birds Eye Walls, John Gentry at Croda International, Terry Hodgetts at AT&T-NCR, Will Clarke and Regina Jackson of Clydesdale Bank, Jean Gentry, Denyse Corfield and Erica Town of Nestlé. This book would have been impossible to produce without the quiet and unassuming effectiveness of Della McGavin, our secretary.

Iain Ballantyne
Nigel Povah

CHAPTER 1

What is an Assessment Centre?

What is assessment centre technology?

As almost every published paper will say, an assessment centre is an event not a location. The term was derived from the location which was used by AT&T in the United States to assess the management potential of hundreds of their staff.

We have used the term assessment centre technology because we believe it accurately reflects two key points. Firstly, the whole of the event is an integrated process of key components. Like many processes there are alternative routes to get to the same outcome, but there are also critical steps which if overlooked can lead to an unsatisfactory outcome.

Secondly, like most process technologies, there is a degree of flexibility over which tools you use to get the job done. This degree of flexibility can lead to two events having quite a different feel.

To start with, the events themselves may last anywhere from between a few hours to a few days. Sometimes assessment centres are known as development centres although this is usually because the information is gathered with the specific intent of supporting personal development. Most centres will use simulations of different kinds but this is not universally so. Indeed the original British model was really a series of interviews with some pencil and paper tests of ability. The simulations used were originally a relatively small part of a three-day procedure although their significance was quickly recognised. Some assessment centres may include some form of feedback from peers, some may include an element of self-assessment, some may include psychometric tests, where others do not include any of these features. Almost as confusing is the plethora of language that is used to describe the target of the assessment, variously known as attributes, competencies, performance dimensions or criteria.

Whatever the complexities are, any definition must encapsulate the essential or universal aspects of all these events. All assessment centres attempt to assess how competent a person is at present, either in their current role or, more usually, compared to the demands of some future job. All assessment centres focus on behaviour in two ways. Firstly, what is observed at an assessment centre is behaviour, since what someone says or does cannot be anything else. Secondly, behaviour is the start of the design process since what you are trying to do is assess the behaviours that are important to function well in the prospective job.

Defining assessment centre technology: the key features

The main feature of assessment centres as we now understand them is that they are a multiple assessment process. There are five main ways in which that is so. A *group* of participants takes part in a *variety* of exercises observed by a *team* of trained assessors who evaluate each participant against a *number* of predetermined, job related behaviours. Decisions are then made by pooling *shared data*.

MULTIPLE PARTICIPANTS

There are some events called assessment centres in which there is only one participant. These are usually for very senior appointments where the object is to give the participant a thorough final check before an appointment is negotiated between the parties. More often than not these are conducted by a search consultant or by psychologists attached to a search consultancy. However, as understood in general use, one of the features of an assessment centre (and all the variants) is that a number of participants will be brought together for the event. Although there are no absolute rules, the practical constraints of designing an assessment centre tend to demand multiples of four or six participants. At numbers of beyond 12 participants the logistics can get out of hand very easily.

COMBINATION OF METHODS

The focal point of most assessment centres is the use of work sample tests or simulations. The principle of their design is to replicate, so far as is possible, the kind of tasks that a participant would be required to do in the job for which they are being considered. To gain a full understanding of a person's range of capabilities, one simulation is not usually enough to develop anything like a complete picture. If, for example, we were interested in selecting future salespeople it is clear that a useful simulation would be to ask the participant to make a formal presentation. While this may suffice to assess some aspects of the job, it is also clear that effective salespeople are well organised and that a presentation would not of itself give adequate evidence of organising skills. To build the complete picture one needs to use other means of assessing the ability to organise, which could include another kind of simulation, possibly an interview or maybe a psychometric test. Without pre-empting the principle of design (see Chapter 4), we look for at least two sources of evidence of a particular skill, competency or capability, which in turn implies that no single method or instrument will fit the bill.

TEAM OF ASSESSORS

To escape the difficulties associated with the one-on-one interview, used either as a means of selection or in some aspects of performance measurement, it is important to use a team of assessors. There are endless debates about ratios in the literature; but the important points of principle are that each assessor should be able to observe each participant in one of the various situations in which participants are asked to perform. Ideally assessors should observe every participant, but not more than once. The reasoning behind these principles will be outlined in Chapter 6. The team of assessors should include a balance between experts – that is psychologists and human resource managers – and line managers, all of whom need appropriate training.

BEHAVIOURALLY BASED, FOUNDED ON JOB ANALYSIS

As with any other method of assessment, the start point has to be some analysis of the job to determine what it is that discriminates between the performance of successful job incumbents and those that perform less successfully in the same job. There are a wide variety of terms for the things that discriminate; among them are attributes, dimensions, criteria and most recently competencies.

Although it is quite clear in a wide range of management/professional jobs that specific knowledge is a component that has some importance, it is not usually a significant indicator of career success. To take a very obvious example, all doctors study medicine yet few become consultants. At the other end of the scale there are a few who should not be practising – so job knowledge in itself is not always sufficient to guarantee career success. Many lay people, particularly in management, will say that success is really a matter of personality but again no personality acts in a vacuum; it has to have a context.

Successful performance in any job is likely to be founded on a combination of factors, some of which may be to do with disposition, some to do with attitudes, some with particular skills that have been developed over time, some to do with energy levels, some to do with particular ways of thinking or problem-solving and some may be to do with knowing about particular things. The objective of a job analysis is to determine which of these things are most important. Russell (1985) identifies two groups of criteria for management jobs: problem-solving and aspects of the way managers relate to other people (more of this in Chapter 3).

In determining what to call the behaviours, we prefer to use the word 'criteria'. This is a neutral term meaning no more or less than the things against which performance is judged in an assessment centre and elsewhere. Although there will be exceptions, we will attempt to use 'criteria' throughout the rest of this book.

SHARED DATA

From the earliest days an essential feature of the design of assessment centres was that data about participants are shared between the assessors. In the case of a selection decision, no final decision is made until all the evidence is gathered from observations of participants in all the various situations and the assessors have conferred together to agree a final rating. This process of conferring together is variously known as the consensus meeting, the wash-up or assessor discussion and for the sake of consistency we will use the last term.

Whatever the title the objective is the same. A team of assessors meets to consider all the evidence at one time having had no previous discussions. In the case of a development centre, it is less likely that any kind of mark or score will be allocated as the objective of the data-sharing is to collect information together to feed back to participants on their comparative strengths and weaknesses.

Once again there are few absolute rules because a contemporary trend is to give more detailed feedback to participants even where the primary objective is to make a pass/fail decision. The most significant point is that, in a well-designed assessment centre, the individual assessor should not have all the data on any single participant until the assessor discussion has taken place.

Where did these centres come from?

It is a little known fact that assessment centres were invented in Europe not, as is commonly supposed, in America. Although it is probably true to say that most of what is available from consultants in the private sector is heavily influenced by America, there is a parallel European tradition that still exists to a large extent in the public sector. More of this later. For reasons connected with the subsequent careers of the researchers involved, it is probable that the best known precursor to what we now know as assessment centres is the Admiralty Interview

Board. The Board started in 1942 and followed similar developments that took place in other branches of the armed forces, particularly the War Office Selection Board (WOSB) in the army, itself preceded by a similar approach to officer selection in Germany.

The same period saw significant development take place in the field of psychometric testing. Both of these techniques were found to give significantly better results than the almost universal method of selection: the interview. The words 'significantly better' will be elaborated on in later chapters. For the moment we'll consider why these developments took place under the exigencies of war.

One of the ironies of war is that technology advances in leaps and bounds propelled, as it were, by the extreme and urgent need to overcome one's adversary by applying science. In the Second World War at least, the same was true for the application of the nascent science of psychology, to some extent because of the advances in other technologies.

When conscription started in earnest, all branches of the forces were faced with two key facts in relation to the ranks of serving men. The first was that while there was still a need for infantrymen and deck-hands, many more people would be involved in operating advanced equipment. Secondly, it was clearly too expensive and too time-consuming to wait until a course of training was over to find that someone could not successfully operate a radio transmitter. A way had to be found of identifying people who could at the very least benefit from a course of training and had the potential to develop their skills. Hence the rapid development of what we now know as aptitude tests.

In relation to the selection of officers, the situation was somewhat different. The prevailing culture relied on an assumption that a person's background was adequate preparation to lead other people. Although that background was often understood to be a matter of social class, it was also true that success in the ranks was a significant route to a commission. Although officers did receive some training, very little thought was given to understanding the capabilities that were required to lead other people in the prevailing conditions. In short, there was an embarrassingly high incidence of inexperienced officers being 'returned to unit' because of some perceived or actual failure in the field. The psychologist's contribution here was to develop a selection mechanism which considerably reduced that problem. There are two key features that mark this procedure as the forerunner of the modern assessment centre: the study of behaviour as an indicator of success and the use of multiple inputs of evidence to the selection decision.

Tracing the growth of assessment centres

Although the War Office Selection Boards were not universally accepted at first, they were able to demonstrate improvements in the selection of officer candidates for training versus the previously existing selection boards. The first significant validation study (Vernon and Parry, 1949) was able to comment that the 'Army was led to believe it was . . . getting the best possible officers'.

The next recognisable step takes us to the United States, again in a military context, where in 1944 the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA, adopted the method for selection of intelligence agents. It is this event that is often thought to be the birth of modern assessment centres. Although this is not strictly true, later developments in methodology pioneered by the CIA provided the kind of simulations and content that are now commonly practised.

The difference between the British and American approaches still influences the style and content of assessment centres. To a considerable extent, assessment centres conducted in the public sector are identifiable as direct descendants of the WOSB or Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB) approach (described below). In the private sector the style is more like that developed by the OSS.

The 'British' approach would involve a number of interviews, carefully constructed to avoid overlap, unstructured discussions/debate on a topic, a piece of lengthy written work and a number of practical/physical exercises in which each candidate is assigned to lead the others solving a problem. By contrast, the 'American' approach does not assign leadership but discussions are prestructured and often require a candidate to take on an assigned role. This requires the candidate to bargain or negotiate resource in some way. American assessment centres are more likely to include one-on-one roleplays and use an in-basket rather than a lengthy written exercise.

On this side of the Atlantic Ocean the first civilian application was in the creation of the CSSB, which was used to assess the suitability of candidates for the fast-stream appointments in both the Home Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service. Initiated in 1945, the CSSB has operated continuously since that time. It was originally set up because the previous selection procedure relied heavily on educational attainment, clearly inappropriate for a generation of people who had been engaged in fighting the war rather than studying. Naturally there have been developments since then but the main components remain much the same. Exercises were designed to resemble the work of a senior civil servant, including sitting on a committee, writing an appreciation of a dossier, giving a short talk, handling a problem in committee. In addition candidates complete a battery of ability tests, are assessed by their peers, complete questionnaires and are interviewed by three different people.

The next noticeable development in civilian application was the use of assessment centres by the US telephone company, AT&T, which developed a longitudinal study of management progress. Starting in the early 1950s, the company's objective was to identify those people who would have the capability of progressing to a managerial career, regardless of educational attainment and previous background. This work has been heavily influential in two directions. Firstly, it has been a substantial source of data for validating the utility of the method. Amazingly, the data gathered at the time of the centre, in the form of a prediction of the grade the participant would ultimately achieve, were never released into the organisation. At periodic intervals comparisons were made between predicted grade and what was actually attained. Following publication of the results, other companies, notably in the US, started flocking to AT&T to find out what was going on and to adopt the method themselves.

The other development was that various people from AT&T decided to set up on their own to answer this demand and gave birth to the forerunner of DDI, a consultancy company that specialises in the identification and development of people's potential. As the commercial pioneer, initially in the US and soon after in Europe, DDI's influence is very much felt in the design approach taken by consultancies worldwide, particularly in the content and style of simulations, the criteria measured and the 5-point rating scale.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there was steady if unspectacular growth in the use of the methodology, mainly in America and in the main confined to subsidiaries of US multinationals in Europe. Dulewicz et al. (1983) pointed out that the main users of assessment centres at that time were subsidiaries of US multinationals such as IBM and Rank Xerox. However, the same competitor interest that affected growth in the US has been

evident in the UK. As one example, Mars imported assessment centres for graduate selection to the UK in the early 1970s and for a while stood alone in the confectionery industry. By the end of the 1980s, both of the obvious competitors, Cadbury Schweppes and Rowntree Mackintosh, now part of Nestlé, were using assessment centres as their final selection mechanism in graduate recruitment.

Also, some market-leading European multinationals adopted the use of assessment centres from the middle of the 1970s. Among them were two Anglo-Dutch companies – Shell and Philips – and the German company Siemens.

Throughout this time the use of assessment centres grew in the UK public sector, perhaps the best-known example being the Home Office Assessment Unit. There was a further significant boost when in 1978, the Equal Opportunities Commission decided to adopt assessment centres as their method of recruiting administrative and some executive-officer grades into the commission. It should be no surprise to anyone that their main concern was to adopt a scrupulously fair mechanism for selection.

Various researchers have tried to estimate how widespread the usage of assessment centres is. Gaugler et al. (1987) published a study whose main objective was to analyse all the previously published data on validation, as we shall see later. As part of the context they tried to estimate the usage and found that at least 2000 American companies were using assessment centres. In 1989 a British researcher, Mabey, estimated that 37 per cent of companies employing more than 1000 people had used assessment centres within the past year, although their use was predominantly still in recruitment of managers.

Estimated current usage

A survey of usage published by Boyle et al. (1993) attempted to demonstrate the prevalence of assessment centres in the UK and conduct some further analysis. Broadly the conclusions were that assessment centre usage was more prevalent in larger companies and in the private sector. There are also substantial differences between sectors. Energy companies, banking and food, drink and tobacco companies use assessment centres extensively, whereas in education, the media and local government there were lower rates of use. Nearly half (49.9 per cent) of private sector organisations and 38.7 per cent of public sector organisations used assessment centres. While it is always difficult to verify these figures, the same is true for all the previous studies, so it seems fair to suggest that there is an accelerating rate of growth in the 1990s. There were some other interesting findings. The research examined different applications of the technology and identified four main uses:

- Selection at the point of entry, normally graduate recruitment.
- External recruitment at a more senior level.
- Identifying people for internal promotion opportunities.
- Career development.

Some organisations use the technology for all these applications and some events may have at least two purposes. The following differences were observed. Large private-sector organisations tend to use assessment centres for graduate recruitment, whereas the public sector, which do recruit graduates in large numbers, tend to use them for externally advertised senior positions. Large private-sector organisations are also much more likely than

are public-sector organisations to use assessment centres for internal promotion. A survey by the Industrial Relations Services in 1997 indicated that assessment centre usage is increasing more rapidly than any other selection method in the UK, with over 65 per cent of organisations employing more than 1000 people using them.

In one respect, public and private sectors are very like one another. Today, career development appears to be the most frequent application of assessment centre techniques in both public and private sector organisations.

In 1999, the authors conducted research on behalf of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) to understand the extent to which the process had penetrated the graduate recruitment marketplace. Eighty-three per cent of the employers indicated that they used assessment centres at some stage of the recruitment process. Whereas the reseach of Boyle et al. (1993) showed differences in rates of usage between the public and private sectors, the AGR response noted no such difference; although AGR membership tends to represent central government, rather than the public sector as a whole. It was also clear, rather contrary to expectation, that assessment centres were being used by some (relatively) small organisations for graduate recruitment.

Where has the growth come from?

At least part of the growth outlined has been due to competitive pressure. It is quite surprising to hear comments from large companies that many are continuing to experience difficulty in recruiting 'good' graduates at a time when higher education is expanding fast. However real or unreal the perception is, many of our leading organisations still see themselves as competing annually for a relatively limited resource. The same is as true for legal practices or accountancy firms as it is for manufacturers. As in any other competitive situation, when one of the leading players in a particular market innovates in some way, their competitors respond, in this case by improving their own recruitment practices. We cited earlier the example of Mars, Rowntree Mackintosh and Cadbury Schweppes. In the energy business British Gas, BNFL, Powergen, BP and Shell all use assessment centres and all are competing for similar graduates.

Another significant contributor to the growth of this activity is the growth in consultancy by occupational psychologists and by people whose background may have been in personnel management or, more likely, training. Although professional qualifications may appear to be an important predictor of competence, it is not true that all occupational psychologists are well trained or even interested in the principles of assessment centre design. Equally, there are a number of ex-trainers who understand the principles well and construct very good and highly valid assessment centres. Regrettably, one of the functions of the growth of interest in assessment centres is the growth of poorly constructed assessment centres which are a disservice to their clients and, more seriously, can have a severely negative impact on the future of the people who undergo the experience. This issue is covered in the next chapter.

Perhaps the most significant contributor to the growth in use of assessment centres has been the rapid rate of change experienced by many organisations as we make the transition into the twenty-first century. Among other factors, there has been a decline in both manual and clerical semi-skilled work as computers have taken over much of the routine. In many organisations, the managerial role is changing from direct boss of bits of the hierarchy to

contract manager of bought-in services. There is also a widespread recognition that skills acquired in one's twenties are no longer sufficient to span a working lifetime.

All of these circumstances are putting more pressure on more people to perform effectively and to adapt successfully to increasing rates of change. Organisations which wish to have a long-term future have simply had to become more professional in identifying and developing the talents they need. The growth in use of assessment centres reflects that increasing professionalism.

Costs and benefits

In the next chapter we examine in detail how to calculate the costs and benefits of using assessment centres. Suffice it to say that one of the main inhibitors to even more widespread use of these techniques has always been the cost. Costs come in two forms: the cost of development and the cost of providing a number of assessors for an event of anything up to a week's duration. Normally assessors are people of reasonable seniority who have other equally important calls on their time. Despite this, these very busy people become converts to the process and we have to ask why this should be so.

There is, of course, a substantial body of research evidence that testifies to the validity of assessment centres and this will often be used as part of the initial sales case and during the training of assessors. This is perfectly proper, since one can demonstrate that assessment centres have a predictive validity roughly three times better than interviewing (Gaugler et al., 1987). But that still does not account for the genuine commitment that assessors give to the process once they have been engaged in it.

What seems to happen is that people stop looking for rational evidence once they become involved emotionally, and with assessment centres people do become passionate advocates. Among the reasons for this are:

- The persuasive logic of the design. Important criteria are immediately visible and if they are not, this raises queries either about the design or about the participant in a way which is not evident in an interview.
- Both participants and assessors regard the process as intrinsically fairer than one person's judgement of another. Indeed there is evidence that graduates accept offers more willingly and stay longer with employers who use assessment centres.
- Both participants and assessors agree that the participant is getting a fair preview of what it is like working in this job or job level. Occasionally people will say that they have been turned away from their ambition to go into management. Whilst regrettable in the short term, this self-insight can be important for employer and employee alike.
- There can be no denying that the behaviour actually took place (provided it was accurately recorded). When it comes to giving feedback in a developmental context, that fact and the fact that many assessors have observed a person, makes it much more difficult for a participant to resist unpalatable information.
- As a place to start a developmental process, the development centre has obvious appeal. It is a high-impact, one-off event which the participant sees as low threat (provided it is advertised as such). Most people have more profound self-insight and are therefore more inclined to plan their own future success at a development centre than any number of career development discussions.

Spin-off benefits

Before closing this chapter, we should mention some spin-off benefits that are frequently observed although they are not central to making a case in favour of using assessment centres.

OVERLOOKING APPARENTLY POORLY QUALIFIED CANDIDATES

In recruitment regimes that narrow the basis of choice to academic qualifications and experience, good candidates are frequently overlooked. Ample evidence of this was found in the early WOSB studies where many soldiers, sailors and airmen were able to demonstrate real ability, despite educational disadvantage.

Asking for specific kinds of experience often indicates intellectual laziness, because it fails to raise the fundamental question of what an organisation expects someone to have learnt (to have developed skill in) as a result of having had that experience.

ASSESSORS GAIN IMPORTANT INSIGHT INTO HUMAN RESOURCE ISSUES

Without question, acting as an assessor involves the development of skills that transfer readily back into normal working circumstances. Primarily, their observations about people in general become more accurate and, as a consequence, they and those around them have increased confidence in their judgement of people-related issues. Many human resource professionals see the benefit in terms of being better able to share their concerns with their line manager colleagues.

Strategic use of assessment centre technology

The next chapter elaborates on the need to develop a policy statement, including the need to make public the reasons for adopting assessment centre technology. A point that is often not recognised initially, but does become apparent over time, is that this approach can be a central strategic plank of all human resource management issues. To be more precise, it is the understanding that human performance is based on behaviour and the ability to share a common behavioural language that become the cornerstones of a human resource strategy.

Strategic issues are often subtle and abstract. They are also often overlooked by managers at all levels and in all sorts of organisations who tend to be driven by more immediate concrete demands. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying things, *the* strategic human resource issue is how to achieve the optimum performance from people.

The expression of optimum performance depends on the values of the organisation. In manufacturing, optimum performance is usually concerned with productivity, whereas in a hospital the imperatives are to do with excellent medical care. These value systems are driven by the organisation's mission, that is its view of what it exists for. In turn, the mission is susceptible to change by ongoing interaction with the wider environment. This sequence of events is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

The most significant component in turning these visions and values into reality is having competent managers. The term 'manager' is applied loosely here. The head teacher of any school will use all of the talents that we recognise among people who have 'manager' in

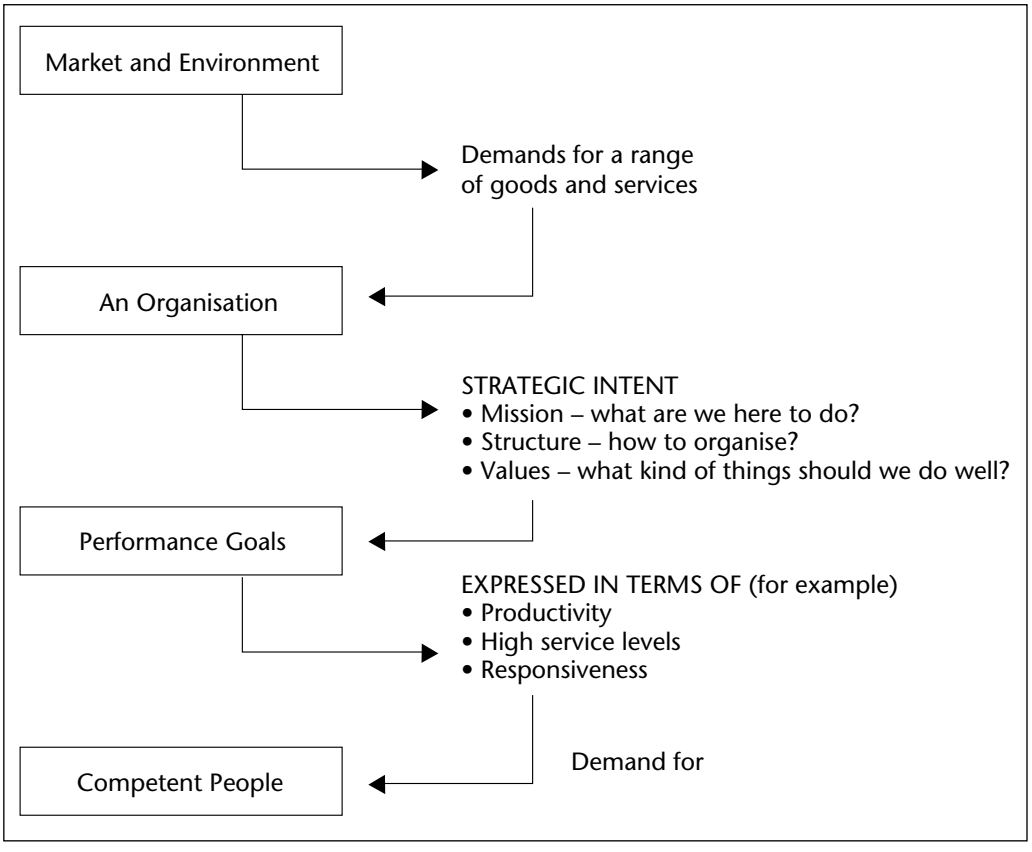

Figure 1.1 Organisational factors that affect human resource strategy

their job title. It is the recognition of what those talents are that provides the unifying force for a human resource strategy. In case anyone should think that this is an excessively managerial argument, we believe that the same strategic logic applies to non-managerial jobs.

Much day-by-day personnel work is involved in recruitment, training and writing policies and procedures, supervising appraisal schemes and so on. Figure 1.2 demonstrates how behaviour becomes the focal point that gives a unifying sense of purpose to those disparate activities.

Finally a brief comment about the use of the terms 'participant' and 'candidate'. In this chapter we have tended to use both depending on context. From now on, in the interest of consistency, we will use the term 'participant' unless it is inappropriate to do so.

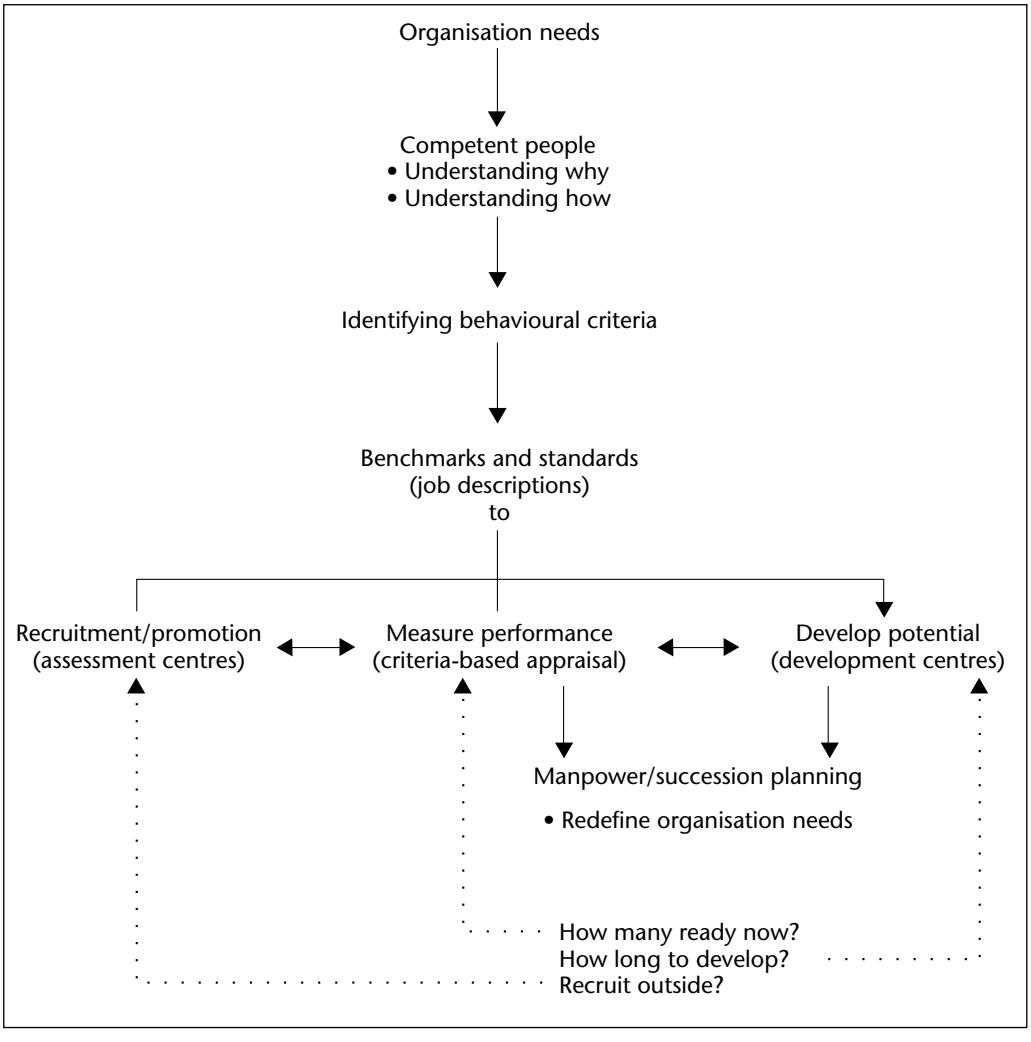

Figure 1.2 The role of behaviour in HR strategy