Assessments of candidates have been going on for decades and the primary route that was adopted was many rounds of interviews in order to know about an applicant’s aptitude and acumen. For example, an organization was looking for a candidate with a specific software skill. Out of four shortlisted candidates one was put through four rounds of interviews. The entire procedure took 20 days and even after that the candidate was informed that she will be on one month trial period. The candidate did not entertain this and said that if the organization after four rounds of interviews cannot make up its mind, it is not worth joining. The organization kept looking for an apt fit and may have by now lost the project too. To avoid this kind of subjective judgments or group discussions, which measure dimensions like leadership, planning, sensitivity, problem solving, decision-making, creativity, sociability, and so on. Or nowadays companies have their own competency framework on which assessment centres, internal or outsourced, map different competencies for companies. For instance, "Virtusa has developed an integrated approach ‘Work-Home-University’ to assess competencies such as technical/skill proficiency, domain expertise, behavioural/leadership competencies and core values called PIRL (pursuit of excellence, integrity, respect and leadership through empowerment)," informs Ramesh Kannan, director - HR of Virtusa. Further, he says, "Virtusa uses varied exercises like 360 degrees feedback, role based certifications, expert interviewing, simulation exercises, whitepaper best suit the expectations of our Gen-Y workforce. We are leveraging on "personal excellence” to achieve organizational excellence. In the process, we provide clear expectations framework that is specific and unambiguous to the Gen-Y workforce, who loves candid expectation management and assessment coupled with constructive feedback."

The assessment centre concept is effectively used in Europe and Asia to select interns, too. However, this is a challenge for HR execs as it is one of the most difficult of selections owing to the interns or fresh graduates lack of prior appropriate work experience. In situations like hiring laterals or senior/leadership positions the approach is supportive in recognizing which persons may make it to leadership-type roles while supporting others to continue on the functional career path. Like, "For leadership roles at Virtusa, we follow 360 degrees feedback process to identify leadership skills which encompass six leadership traits (entrepreneurship, clarity of thought, client centricity, self awareness, communication, building high performance teams) and on the values of PIRL." ACs provides a window to cross-check or test the data acquired through self reports like interviews. For instance, a candidate might have shown experience of leadership in a behavioural interview, but, when placed in a team exercise he/she may be observed to control, not take note of what others have to say and disregard the non participative team

 mappings

competencies

with assessment centres

BY ARVA SHIKARI

presentation, case studies and assessment tests to measure individual competencies that is determined as important which are a mix of task specific competencies (how they do the job), and context specific competencies (how they would fit with what is wanted in the wider organization)." Also, Virtusa to spot talent has initiatives such as MASHUP contest and TechFest that are very popular and welcomed by its Gen-Y employees. Commenting on managing aspirations for Gen-Y workforce, Kannan says, "We have created our assessment processes to
Assessment centres have become a pertinent tool for organizations to make better decisions about hiring and developing people at various levels of their work life through methods that align well with the role and business objectives!

members. "It is very important to link internally developed competencies to ACs to ensure continuity and buy in from employees," infers Rajendra Ghag, executive vice president, HR at HDFC Life. Even "Employees/candidates also believe the system to be neutral and generally are less aggrieved by results of such ACs," notes Ghag.

Additionally, ACs is also used to select people for cross-functional moves and re-skilling. Modern managers and HR executives realize the importance of objective HR assessment and establishing the ROI on their human resources. The information collected, compiled, consumed, and applied from assessment practices can have a tremendous impact on organizational success. Through Development Dimensions International’s (DDI) extensive research it is derived that competency based assessment is likely to be more effective and deliver a good return on investments and is by far the most effective in terms of their measurement of the factors that predict success. In fact, assessment centres have become an integral part of HR process at organizations like Godrej and Boyce, Mahindra and Mahindra, JK, Bharti Airtel, JCB, HPCL, Coca Cola, Jindal Steel, ISGEC, Maruti, IBM, Marico, ITC and many more. Yogesh Misra, head of Thomas Assessments quotes a recent survey by People Metrics that showed out of 1038 companies surveyed, 497 were actively using assessment development centres and 90% of the remaining companies had plans of using it in future.

Assessment centres have become a vital tool for organizations in their hunt for talent and chiefly for those that want to create a pool of talent that they expect will not only perform well today, but, adjust and mature as industry demands keep altering. In fact, on the strategic importance scale, Hay Group
research shows that executives consistently rank the employee performance ahead of productivity and technology. Yet, very few feel they have enough talented managers to fully pursue their most pressing market opportunities and business priorities. To overcome that hurdle, forward-looking organizations seek to increase 'bench strength', and create high-performance work cultures by evaluating management and/or leadership talent. According to Hay Group such organizational talent reviews frequently provide leverage in helping achieve large-scale shifts in organizational focus brought on by events such as an IPO, merger, or a significant change in strategy.

Mapping competencies
Assessment centre is one of the most scientific and accurate methods of mapping competencies as it uses a series of multiple tests for assessing a single competency. The use of multiple tools to assess competencies increases the accuracy of measurement. Typically, in an assessment centre, as Mishra explains, "The participants are evaluated against a competency model on a behaviourally anchored Rating Scale (BARS). Multiplicity of assessors and exercises ensures high degree of reliability and assessment against competency model by trained observers ensures validity of the data." For example, the competency 'communication' can be measured in a behavioural event interview (BEI), group discussion and case presentation. "A person who does not speak in a large group will still communicate in a BEI or small group. The inference here is that the person lacks the confidence to communicate in a large group and that becomes the training need under the communication competency," says Misra. Also, "Research indicates there is no substitute for objectively observing and systematically measuring how potential employees will actually perform 'on the ground'. A well-designed assessment centre is the most effective tool available for assessing individuals in both individual and group-based environments, for both selection and development. Assessment centres are one of the most robust and effective ways to determine if a candidate is a good fit for a role. They also offer the candidate an opportunity to get a better sense of

what is involved in the role they applied for," adds Saurabh Singh, head - talent assessment of Pearson Talent Assessment (PTA).

Competency mapping is implemented through multiple stages. Explaining the various stages of assessments at JK Paper Limited is the company’s vice president (HR), Dr. T.K. Mandal "It is extremely important to work out the reference set of competencies. We have sets of 12 competencies (behavioural/generic) across three levels - frontline, mid level and leadership level. Our assessments are handled by external assessors to avoid any internal influence and are typically spread over three days. The first day is spent on various exercises, role play, case studies, presentations, some psychometric tests, and BEI. The second day goes in analysis, summarization and feedback. Finally, a joint development plan for the individual in form of an IDP is chalked out on the third day. The methods adopted are well researched and are extremely successful. Further, our assessment centre results are measured in terms of different potential categories - A, B, C1 and C2, of which A is the best rating. Similarly, our performance measures are summarized into score ranges of 0 to 5, 5 to 7.5 and 7.5 to 10. A correlation is established between these two considering all cases over a four-year period, which gave rise to a high correlation coefficient. Also, we monitor on-job performance of individuals’ vis-à-vis their competency scores. We have found a very high coefficient of correlation between the two."

HDFC Life out of its total 10 competencies (called Mantra 10) assesses specific levels of candidate/role. "We use 4-5 competencies in each of the exercises. In all four to five exercises that are used in one AC gets sufficient evidence of the competencies that we look for to prove the potential of candidates to take up higher roles being assessed for. Trained assessors (equal numbers of external and internal assessors) then observe the candidates through each of the exercises and record their findings. At the end of each exercise the assessors observing candidates moderate their records and assign point scores to each of the candidates. Generally, 2.5 to 3.0 on a five point scale are considered to be the benchmark score to declare any candidate to be successful in AC. In HDFC Life, we have been using ACs to decide elevations for last more than two years. We fill more than 40% vacancies from within and use ACs as one of the important tools,” reveals Ghag. Director-human
resources of Canara HSBC Oriental Bank of Commerce Life Insurance Company Limited, Ashish Kumar Srivastava feels, "Assessment scores need to go one step further, i.e. instead of just communicating the score, it is vital to enable the person to understand it's meaning and relevance to his immediate present, and how he/she can change this, should it be desirable!" Also, says Misra, "If follow-up actions are not taken then not only will the money spent on assessment centres go waste, but it can also make employees cynical towards any future interventions."

HSBC utilizes assessment centres for hiring by an open and transparent system of competence assessment with career development through training. It has clearly defined 13 competencies that the bank expects to have in its managers. To evaluate these competencies it applies a series of aptitude tests, psychometric tests, group exercises and every test may assess more than one competency and every competency is measured more than once during the procedure. The assessments are conducted by senior line managers and a candidate is offered a job only if the candidate meets the minimum standard on a majority of the competencies. HSBC employs assessment centres to recruit on campus too. Also, correlation studies are conducted to match performance at an assessment centre with consequent performance on the job. Then the assessment centres goes on to include employee development. Thereafter, a follow up is done by high potential managers with a focus on career development. HSBC attempts to include it with leadership, company goals and its business strategy. Competencies are mapped on the basis of business core technology and practice teams. At Virtusa, we assess each candidate against the competencies and their fit to our corporate values and culture. This ensures that our competency management has a 360 degrees perspective of the candidate's abilities and helps in channelizing the employee's abilities in an effective and efficient way. This approach supports the career progression for our employees and also contributes to the organizational goal of developing leaders from within. About 70% of the leadership roles are fulfilled internally. Also, the Work-Home-University approach has helped our employees in meeting their career aspirations," explains Kannan.

In external assessment centres competencies are mapped by doing a detailed study of the organization and the context helps ascertain and clearly define the objective for undertaking an assessment centre activity. "This stage also provides an in-depth understanding of the competency framework, KRA's and factors related to job performance. This preliminary information is then used to create a behavioural framework wherein the technical details of the role are separated out and the competencies are broken down into observable behaviours. Here, it is critical to define the success parameters after these parameters are whetted and approved by the organization's stakeholders. It is against these parameters that a candidate's potential is assessed," elucidates Singh.

In a case that PTA handled, it had to design an assessment centre for an UK-based IT-KPO firm for its internal job postings at a managerial level. Besides, developing customized assessment tools, PTA offered tools to assess critical thinking and decision making skills and personality test to assess workplace personality characteristics combined with personal and interpersonal values that drive a person's workplace motivations. This information was then used to create an engagement framework for employees that will

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**Why an assessment centre works?**

- High predictor of job performance
- Highly relevant, observable and comprehensive details about a candidate's current and future potential
- Transparent and comprehensive information from multiple judgements
- High value engagement and internal branding exercise for the organization to convey employees are being taken seriously and treated fairly
- Effective preview of the role or job level
- Developmental payoffs to candidates arising out of a self-evaluation and self-insight model
- Completely audited and legally defensible framework

(Source: PTA)
motivate them as per their personal motivations, with the long term results manifesting in high productivity and low turnovers. Based upon the findings of assessors, this firm realized the relevance of the assessment centre was not limited to the current job postings. It decided to expand the application of the assessment centre findings to create a development model where all high potential employees were assessed on the customized tools as well as the critical thinking and personality tests for the purpose of succession planning and to create better engaged employees, respectively.

In another case one of the leading FMCG companies in snacks segment wanted to identify the most competent territory sales in-charge (TSI) with capability and competencies to take up the responsibility of a sales officer. It also wanted to create a development plan for the remaining TSIs so that they could be trained. There were six competencies on which the TSI were to be assessed viz. interpersonal influencing, team management skills, analytical thinking, problem solving, commercial acumen, relationship building, and customer centricity. Thomas Assessments used individual case study, role play, BEI, group simulation including team game and group case study, psychometric assessments, behavioural profiling, and trainability assessment to assess all the competencies. The assessments were done in one day. Based on the results of assessments, a merit list was created and promotions were carried out. Subsequently, one to one feedback was given and individual development plans were created for all the employees.

Room for enhancement
AC is time consuming and resource intensive and this could be a huge challenge for any company that wants to put into practice the...
assessment centre system for resourcing purposes. In addition, Mandal says, "Any process involving human beings is prone to judgmental errors. Since assessment centres are largely centered on assessors, elimination of all kinds of bias is extremely important, although this is minimized to a large extent with the involvement of more than one assessor per assessee and use of multiple tools to measure each competency. Extensive education on the competency framework, definition, processes, purpose, etc. across organization is another important step needing priority. Also, lack of transparency invariably leads to avoidable cynicism and loss of trust."

Suman Rudra, the India HR Leader of NCR India feels, "The challenges are in establishing the linkages between the tools and organizational competency framework. It also lies in creating real business issues and leadership specific challenges to NCR that incumbents shall encounter in their roles and how they are able to navigate them."

However, Srivastava says, "As you experiment with sum or parts of it, the results are different in quality. The primary challenge remains with the final experience at an individual, team and at an organizational level. The individuals with prior experience of AC, if negative or positive, hugely impact the implicit and explicit 'perceived value' and 'fairness' of an AC. It's imperative on all counts to ensure absolute transparency. And we can only achieve that by simplification and eschewing jargons. Also, the organization has a huge responsibility to ensure appropriateness. It's a must to sensitize, make the assessors and the participants aware of its finer nuances that can make or break its effectiveness. At the end, the only measure is benefits perceived by the person."

The question: how long should the outcome of an AC is considered as valid is another challenge. Kannan suggests that,
‘Duration can be about 12 months and then we can look at a re-validation exercise after it.

To truly maximize the value of assessment for business purposes, there are several significant considerations that must be taken into account. Smita Affinwalla, the head of consulting at DDI India gives a few facets.

● Assessments must be aligned with business purpose: For instance, tests are cost-effective when their purpose is to screen out the unqualified, or to identify those who are likely to do well in later evaluations.

● Alternatively, assessments used for professional development tend to be more in-depth than those used for selection. In developmental assessments, candidates receive detailed insights into their performance across a broad range of competencies. In times of substantial organizational and job change, to assure accuracy and fairness, assessment results are often blended with information about current performance as the criteria for placement and downsizing decisions.

● Multiple assessment methods create better prediction and development insights. The skills required for a role or a job is broader than what can be measured by any one technique. All facets of success-competencies, experience, knowledge, and other personal attributes—should be systematically evaluated to make reliable hiring, promotion, and succession management decisions, and to provide sound developmental insights.

● Selection has a greater impact than development. Though assessment tools are effective when used for both selection and development, greater value is realized from applying assessment techniques to selection because of the impact good selection decisions have on an organization’s success.

● Validity and utility of assessments must be demonstrated. For simulations and interviews, a job-analysis process should link job activities to assessment tools and targets. For tests and inventories, links should be established to the job performance. When it comes to choosing assessments to maximize performance outcomes, the accuracy of the process and the decision rules that are used to determine pass and fail points, are as important as the legal considerations surrounding assessments. Also, a means of demonstrating return.

● Technology enhances the assessment process. Technology continues to advance our ability to collect and track information about people, presenting vast benefits. An integrated set of automated tools that helps administer recruiting, hiring, on-boarding, performance management, and talent development can create abundant efficiencies and new opportunities to use assessment information to guide an organization’s human capital processes.