

# Assessment Centres for Graduate Recruitment: The Graduate Experience

*“Organisations are damaging their employer brand and bottom line by engaging in poor recruitment practices” (Personnel Today, 2010).*

The key to driving organisations forward in today’s knowledge based economy rests on the talent pool available. Forward thinking organisations realise the importance of obtaining high calibre graduates, so the ability to consistently identify and recruit the best talent in the market place provides them with a competitive advantage.

Although reducing the spend on the graduate recruitment process may provide an immediate way to save money, reducing graduate intake or cutting back in this way will result in long-term financial and operational issues and a potential skills gap. A business’ competitive advantage can be lost if their recruitment practices are not up to scratch, as highlighted by Personnel Today (2010).

## Key findings were:

- 89% of respondents stated that their experience of graduate ACs was either “not at all” or “a little” positive
- 58% of participants did not have a better understanding of the job they were applying for following the AC
- 44% of the graduates we surveyed felt the AC placed an unnecessary amount of “stress” and “strain” on them
- 42% of AC candidates did not feel valued throughout the process and developed a negative perception of the organisation as a result
- 38% felt they were unable to display their full capability during the AC.

In this report, Berkshire Consultancy explores the experiences of graduates based on recent research into Assessment Centres (AC) for graduate recruitment and investigates how organisations can ensure that their recruitment process is both engaging and effective in guiding their recruitment decisions.

## **Berkshire Consultancy conducted research to explore the Graduate Experience of Assessment Centres for Recruitment.**

Assessment Centres for graduate recruitment provide a highly valid indication of on-the-job performance and ensure minimal adverse impact (ensuring the right candidates are selected without placing unnecessary stress or strain on them) if they are designed and administered to a high standard. According to the International Task Force on Assessment Centre Guidelines (2000), ACs should be based on thorough job analysis techniques to ensure they relate well to the job vacancy and capture the behaviours which are relevant to successful job performance. The accuracy of ACs is dependent on factors including: design, content, structure and relationships between variables<sup>1</sup>. All aspects of the AC, including candidate feedback, must encompass the behaviours being assessed<sup>2</sup>.

Berkshire Consultancy offer bespoke assessment and development solutions based on best practice and the latest research, including our own research studies.

Our approach to assessment provides organisations with flexible and dynamic options for identifying and selecting the right individuals for the right roles.

<sup>1</sup> Messick, 1998 / <sup>2</sup> Thornton and Rupp, 2005

## Candidate Engagement in the Process

Evidence demonstrates that the AC process is low in adverse impact, particularly in comparison to mental ability tests. However, AC"s can have an adverse impact on self-esteem amongst candidates, especially for those who are unsuccessful. Therefore, ACs must be managed carefully and sensitively.

### Key findings were:

- On average, our survey indicated that graduates rated their level of stress to be six on a scale of 1-10, with ten being high
- Almost half the participants interviewed stated that the stress caused by the employer during the AC was unnecessary

Key in minimising unwanted and adverse impact is the provision of developmental feedback to individual candidates so that they feel that they have benefitted from the experience, whether successful or not. We believe that feedback is most useful when it is given during the AC as well as promptly following completion of the AC, so that candidates have the earliest possible opportunity to act on it. This is particularly important at this early career stage, to help graduates to learn what employers want and to improve their performance in similar selection processes. It is also important that they feel valued and given individual attention throughout the AC so that they feel as confident as possible in what is typically experienced as a stressful situation and able to demonstrate their capability and potential to the best of their ability. This means selecting assessors who graduates can relate well to and who will create a positive environment, ensuring that all candidates leave with a positive impression of the employer.

## Effectiveness of the Assessment Process

### Key findings were:

- 38% of participants felt they did not have the opportunity to display their full capability during the AC
- 42% of participants felt their experience of the recruitment process and AC failed to relate well to the job they were applying for
- More than half (58%) of the graduates who took part in our research felt they did not gain a better understanding of what the job entailed through their attendance on the AC.

Reasons for being unable to perform at their best included:

- Lack of variety in the selected methods of assessment
- ACs which are overcrowded
- Activities were not related to the job vacancy.

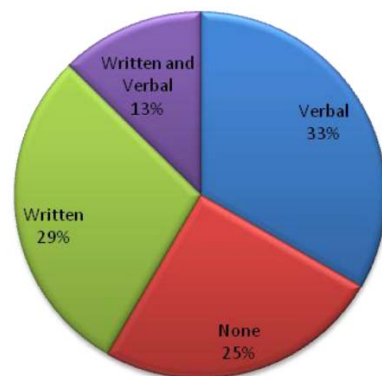
Conversely, applicants give favourable ratings to AC"s based on the extent to which they feel the AC is related to the job they are applying for.

AC design and the assessor"s role in helping graduates to understand the connections between the job applied for and the activities and exercises during the centre is crucial. This can be particularly important in graduate recruitment where reputation and perceived desirability of an organisation can change very quickly. This is often down to the variety of instant communication media that most graduates use which very quickly result in their experiences (good and bad) being shared with a wide audience.

The behaviours assessed during the AC must be clearly related to the job to minimise false expectations, saving time and effort for both parties involved. Organisations need to use the correct techniques to ensure the AC competencies are relevant and sustainable; after all, there is little use in assessing or developing skills that are not going to be used!

The figures below show the type of feedback which is typically given to graduates during and following the process, and also graduates opinions of the organisation they applied to following their interaction with them during the recruitment process.

**Format of Feedback Provided**



**Opinion of the organisation**



## Opinion of the Organisation

Existing research demonstrates that graduates select employers based on their perception of the selection and recruitment process<sup>3</sup>.

### Key findings were:

- 25% of respondents failed to receive feedback from the AC
- 33% of participants stated they did not have a better understanding of the company following their attendance on the AC
- 42% of respondents stated that their opinion of the organisation became negative following their attendance on the AC
- 33% felt no change of opinion towards the organisation
- Only 25% stated their opinion of the organisation had improved.

The reasons which led to improved opinion of the organisation included:

- Rigorous processes which were related to the job
- Adequate and relevant feedback which was useful for personal development
- The amount of time the AC and recruitment process occupied in relation to the level of the job role
- Senior leader involvement.

<sup>3</sup> Garavan and Moreley 1998

Situations which led to negative opinions about the organisation included:

- Limited use of assessment methods i.e. only using psychometric/ability tests
- Poor feedback which was either irrelevant or was delayed for several weeks after the process
- Candidates feeling undervalued throughout the process.

The graduates we surveyed stated that the organisation is viewed positively if the AC provides a developmental experience for each candidate, making it a worthwhile experience whether they are selected or not. Conversely, engaging in poor recruitment practices can be damaging to the employer brand and reputation, as candidates share their experiences with other graduates. Often, the more negative the experience, the more this experience is exaggerated and shared – employers should bear this in mind.

### A Useful Opportunity

#### Key findings were:

- 75% of respondents felt the level of time they invested into the AC and recruitment process was appropriate, considering the role they were applying for and many stated this had the potential to alter their decision to accept the job with the company or to transform their opinion about the organisation
- 76% of respondents stated that the recruitment process and/or AC provided them with a useful development opportunity.

#### Quote from a graduate:

“As a recent graduate going through a number of assessment centres, I support the need for considered and balanced feedback after an assessment centre. This is important for unsuccessful candidates as it provides you with areas to develop and helps improve performance next time. The organisations that take the time and trouble to do this are viewed in a more positive light by candidates and I always share my experiences with my peers”.

### Summary

In the current economic climate, where tight budget constraints exist, AC’s can still offer a cost effective way of recruiting the best candidates for the position, whether they are graduates or otherwise.

An Assessment Centre will only ever be as good as the methodology and design of the process. Research demonstrates that common mistakes occur in the planning and development stages of AC design, therefore, making the recruitment process relevant to the job is extremely important. Assessment Centres for graduate recruitment must carefully consider the relevant competencies and exercises to ensure congruence with the requirements of the job.

## How Berkshire Consultancy can help

Developing AC's with the support of Berkshire Consultancy's experienced team ensures the recruitment process encompasses methods which adhere to requirements, avoiding discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities.

In collaboration with your organisation, Berkshire Consultancy can utilise tools and techniques, supported by research and years of experience, to provide bespoke solutions to meet your assessment and development needs. Our team of Occupational Psychologists and Assessment and Development Consultants ensure your assessment centre process avoids falling into the traps which reduce the effectiveness of ACs. We have many years of experience in administering a variety of Psychometric Tests and providing developmental feedback and work in partnership with our clients, building on existing solutions and enhancing their effectiveness to benefit both the organisation and the individual.

We can develop assessment and development processes which enable you to recruit and retain the staff you need. This is achieved with our blend of effective and proven project management techniques, strong partnerships with clients and clearly defined points of contact and responsibility. We ensure our sustainable solutions are designed, implemented and validated to demonstrate a return on investment.

In the table below, we have highlighted the key issues that have been arisen in our research and demonstrated how our approach overcomes these issues.

Key Issues: Graduate Perspective	The benefit of Berkshire Consultancy's approach
Demonstrate full capability	Berkshire Consultancy ensures the AC process is fair and enables candidates to display their ability and full potential. Our assessors create an environment where candidates feel at ease, therefore reducing unnecessary stress or strain
Negative opinion of the employer	Feedback is handled sensitively, providing practical advice to candidates on areas of strength and development, both of which can be improved. Our approach provides a development opportunity for all candidates to ensure they leave with a positive opinion about the employer
Feeling valued throughout the process	Everyone's unique strengths and style are fairly assessed and we use our track record in equality and diversity to ensure candidates are performing at their best
Relevance of Assessment Centre activities	We ensure we measure aspects required for on-the-job success, based on proven job analysis techniques. We utilise the relevant tools, techniques and knowledge to design the Assessment Centre, accurately reflecting the job role.

If you would like to find out more about Berkshire Consultancy's Assessment and Development offering, please call **Nicola Griffiths** on **0118 932 3580**.