

A measure of good intent



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ACROSS the world, many organisations are attempting to empower employees with 'soft' skills. There is growing realisation that certain soft or behavioural skills directly determine how successful or effective a person will be. This is especially true of the software industry, where the quality of people becomes the single-most important factor in determining the success or demise of an organisation. As employees become increasingly 'self-aware' or 'emotionally mature', they learn to work together in a synchronistic way and contribute more effectively, both as individuals and as team members.

With global interconnectivity, technical skills are relatively easier to acquire. Soft skills, however, are more difficult to identify and learn; but surviving without them is immeasurably harder, both for organisations and individuals. Many of these skills impact the bottomline. For example, employees with an ability to adapt to change or the skill for building relationships or even an ability to communicate articulately can form effective working relationships with clients and bring more business for the organisation.

Over the years, Cognizant has accorded increasing importance to building a behaviourally literate workforce. A separate internal cell, called the Personal Development Centre, exclusively identifies behavioural competencies required for different roles and introducing interventions to help associates acquire these skills.

One of the most successful interventions at Cognizant has been the 'assessment centre initiative' which is a tool that uses simulated

exercises to observe, classify and assess behavioural skills of participants. At Cognizant, this technique has been used effectively since 1998 to assess competencies of 110 managers across the organisation. Considerable effort has been invested in identifying the managerial competencies required to be an effective leader. Nine major clusters of behaviour are assessed through two-day workshops that use a series of simulations. The exercise has been facilitated by the HR department in conjunction with a UK-based consultant, SHL.

The concept of an 'assessment centre' dates back to World War II where simulated exercises were used in the selection of field officers as traditional methods were found unsatisfactory. There is some dispute over whether the British, Germans or Americans used it first. Nevertheless, the concept grew in popularity over the years, especially in the US where it was adopted by private industry. The modern assessment centre evolved, to a large extent, from work done at Bell Laboratories. In fact, even the term 'assessment centre' owes to a building at AT&T where such evaluations were carried out. Over a four-year period, researchers studied 700 managers and estimated that the company gained \$13.4 million through the use of assessment centres.

The past five years have seen a dramatic increase in the use of assessment centres across the world and, today, they are used for a range of activities such as recruitment, promotions and even redundancy.

How it works: In an assessment centre,





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participants are put through a series of individual and group exercises, both written and oral, designed to measure proficiency in distinct competencies/ dimensions. Each competency is measured by more than one exercise.

Typical activities used at Cognizant's assessment centre include:

In-tray or in-basket exercises

Linking everyday activities into a coherent whole is an integral part of every manager's job. The in-tray exercise attempts to simulate this scenario by putting the participant in the hot seat and asking him/her to deal with the contents of a real in-tray of a manager. For example, in the in-tray of a service organisation, 'Item 9' dealing with a customer complaint may need to be viewed along with 'Item 20' dealing with a recent survey showing low staff morale. Often, participants tend to tackle the items sequentially, rather than as parts of a system, indicating the need for managers to understand the importance of seeing the bigger picture.

Leaderless group activities

Here the team is required to work together to propose a solution or arrive at a consensus. For instance, participants assume the roles of Finance Manager, Production Manager, Personnel Manager and so on, and discuss plans to finalise a budget or salvage a sick company. Observers keenly watch

how participants share data with others in the group, their attempts to work with the group to arrive at a solution and so on. Some participants, in their eagerness to coordinate and collate information from the group, completely forget to share any of their own data!

Analysis presentations

Participants analyse a written brief and make recommendations. This is an opportunity for participants to demonstrate their consulting skills while, for example, analysing the detailed performance of a sick company and suggesting novel turnaround methods. Suggestions can range from closing down the current business to relocating to another country! No matter how radical, every idea is valid so long as it is backed by data-rational and strategic thinking.

The assessment centre also uses standardised instruments to measure creativity and analytical ability, along with psychometric profiling which is an indicator of the individual's self-perception.

The strength of the assessment centre lies in the fact that each participant is assessed using multiple techniques and by multiple raters who observe the participants and finally integrate all the information to arrive at a holistic picture of the individual's strengths and areas of improvement. This ensures objectivity and impartiality.

Let's take an example of manager 'A'



whose competencies were evaluated through the assessment centre. At the beginning of the two-day workshop, he was put through an in-tray exercise and evaluated on parameters such as communication, prioritisation, and problem-solving. Later, he was put through two group exercises where he was assigned a brief and asked to work with the group to arrive at a feasible solution.

He was also required to do an in-depth analysis of cases and identify their solutions. In all the exercises, observers watched keenly to gather 'evidence' of competencies that spanned problem-solving, relationship building, strategic vision, leadership, change management, and innovation and creativity.

The results of the assessment are in the form of a detailed report that gives a holistic picture of the individual and aids him in making career- and role-related decisions. For example, some of the key strengths identified for manager 'A' include strategic vision, leadership and the ability to manage change. The organisation made him the head of a regional development centre.

The results also serve as inputs for training and management development programmes designed to enhance his skills in specific areas.

At Cognizant, the assessment centre has emerged as a very valuable tool. Here are some of the advantages Cognizant enjoys through its use:

- Each participant gets a clear picture of where he/she stands with respect to each behavioural competency.
- Data generated is used as an input for several other sub-systems in the organisation such as role-definition for the individual, training and development, and performance management.
- Early identification of potential to help optimise talent and groom future leaders.
- The use of international standards of assessment ensures that the quality of Cognizant managers is on par with global standards.

Thus, assessment centres go a long way in measuring a traditionally 'difficult to measure' concept and ensuring that it's fair in the bargain. ■

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