

Chapter 2 Case: An Assessment Centre in an NHS Trust

This case would be useful to use in a lecture or seminar addressing the following topics:

- Personality assessment
- Assessment centres
- Selection

Issues that are raised by the case include:

1. Assessment is a social and political process. To what extent can it be 'objective' in the ways advocated by academics?
2. Is it possible to obtain an accurate view of an individual's personality? Are our judgements ever free of so-called subjective bias?

Suggested response

Assessment is a social and political process. To what extent can it be 'objective' in the ways advocated by academics?

The case illustrates both social and political processes that may operate in any selection situation. When making a selection decision, organizations are not necessarily looking for the 'best' candidate, but more often, the candidate most like to 'fit in' with the organization's culture. This means that selectors need to think about the types of situation that the potential employee may encounter and make a judgement as to whether the candidate possesses the necessary skills to handle these situations. Similarly, the selectors need to consider the impression the candidate is likely to make on those with whom s/he comes into contact. Clearly, these issues are more salient for some roles rather than others. The case focuses on a managerial role, where issues related to social relationships are likely to be extremely important.

When selection decisions are made, it is likely that some of those involved in the decision making process have more power than others, and this is likely to influence the decision making process. The case illustrates this issue. Individual selectors may not wish to 'rock the boat' by disagreeing with more powerful individuals, and this sheds further doubt on the possibility of making objective judgements in the selection process. Some advocates of assessment centres suggest that these processes can be avoided by getting assessment centre judges to make independent judgements of each candidate's performance on each task in the assessment centre, often using a rating scale of some kind. Judgements are then compared at the end of the assessment process and, theoretically, the candidate with the highest ratings should be selected. However, even when this procedure is followed, it can be difficult to avoid the power dynamics that may be operating within the group of selectors.

Is it possible to obtain an accurate view of an individual's personality? Are our judgements ever free of so-called subjective bias?

Many selection techniques, including assessment centres, are premised on the assumption that accurate views of an individual's personality are obtainable. The

16PF discussed in the case assumes that the self-report generated by individual taking the test is a reasonably objective picture of his or her underlying personality traits. As the case illustrates, despite the fact that one of the candidates appeared to possess the requisite personality characteristics for the role, some of the assessors were more concerned about the impression this individual would make upon colleagues and subordinates. This illustrates that our judgements of people's personality are always contextualised. We might consider an outgoing, lively individual as an ideal social companion, but not necessarily the type of person we would want to have presenting the corporate image of, say, a university.

A second issue concerns whether self-reported personality characteristics present an accurate view of the individual's personality. In selection situations, there is general agreement that candidates are motivated to present themselves in the best possible light, possibly masking or distorting aspects of their personality that they think might be judged unfavourably. Some Psychologists have suggested that this tendency reflects yet another personality characteristic 'social desirability'. However, it remains the case that candidates are likely to 'read' the job requirements in the selection situation and present themselves accordingly

A final issue concerns that idea that it is possible to obtain accurate views of personality. This assumes that personality exists as an objective entity that can be measured in the same way as, say, height or length. Some academics believe that personality not only varies from context to context, but that our judgements of an individual's personality are never free from social influences. Thus, for example, a woman and a man displaying the same behaviour (e.g. interrupting a conversation) may well be judged as possessing different personality characteristics. The man may be judged as assertive, for example, and the woman as 'balshy'. Such differences stem not from the actual characteristics possessed by these individuals but from the ways that men and women are *culturally constructed* in society. Men, for instance, are often culturally constructed as being leader-like and forceful, whereas women are constructed as passive and accommodating. Thus in the example given, the man conforms to these constructions whereas the woman disrupts them, hence giving rise to the different judgements.