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IMPRESSIONS OF MANAGEMENT:
An Interview Study of Eight Managers Who Have Passed the Västra Götalandsregionen Assessment Center

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This is a review of opinions, impressions and suggestions about the assessment center technique, rendered in semi-structured interviews with eight health care managers in February and March of 2002 (between 1 and 2.5 years after the managers passed a managerial assessment center). All interviewees had something positive to say about the assessment center experience, most reported that they learned something about themselves. The assessment center seemed to be perceived as more relevant the more it conveyed the personal experience of acting the manager's role. However, in comparing the exercises with the workplace, the managers emphasized the need to assess the capacity to deal with the stress that is part of their daily tasks, specifically the ability to manage in an empathic, team-building manner, even when making decisions under heavy stress. Implications are discussed and further research is suggested.

In spring 2001 Stig Larsson of Västra Götalandsregionen contacted Gothenburg University, Department of Psychology, with a suggestion for an assignment for the course 'The Consultants' (*Firman*). The assignment was a request for a 'scientific survey' of the criteria Västra Götalandsregionen used in their assessment center for selection of candidates for management training.

Narrowing the scope, Egle Öhman and Jacob Stålhammar consulted reference literature and presented how each of the Västra Götalandsregionen's criteria matched those of contemporary research (Öhman & Stålhammar, 2001). After delivery of the report, Västra Götalandsregionen discussed the possibility for an interview study of managers who had passed assessment center selection in Västra Götalandsregionen. This work is a product of the discussions between Västra Götalandsregionen and the present writer.

The whole of Västra Götalandsregionen (the organization responsible for the health care in Västra Götaland, the region of western Sweden) employs approximately 48,000 persons in 7 hospitals, 160 health centers, and 140 dental clinics; the organization's largest hospital employs approximately 17,500 persons (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2002).

The region has used the assessment center technique for assessing managerial potential since 1996. Of the approximately 450 persons tested in the assessment center, 134 have passed and been offered to proceed to further managerial training. No information on how many of these are currently active as managers was available at the time of this study. Västra Götalandsregionen use rotating assessors who represent the various professions in the region. All assessors have successfully passed the assessment center themselves. In addition to this, they have done a one-day assessor training course and an internship together with a trained assessor (personal communication with Stig Larsson, spring 2002).

The assessment center is not the only career path in Västra Götalandsregionen. All assessment center candidates who pass do not proceed to training, and all managers in the region are not selected in this fashion. Moreover, in addition to the assessment

center for mid-level management, there is another selective device for top management, in cooperation with Skåneregionen (the region of Skåne, southern Sweden) and Stockholms läns landsting (Stockholm County Council).

The overall aim of this study was to render a comprehensive review of opinions, impressions and suggestions about the assessment center technique from former assessment center candidates. The method was to interview managers who have passed assessment center selection in Västra Götalandsregionen.

Previous research

On personnel selection. Personnel accounts for an increasingly important part of the budget of any enterprise, hence, the selection of employees is of major importance. The better the employees are, the more prosperous the organization will be, but the more careful the selection, the greater the cost. Thus, for many positions a straightforward selective device such as the traditional job interview is regarded as sufficient, if personnel selection is not entirely left to its own devices: "Self-selection on cognitive ability may precede personnel selection" (Hough & Oswald, 2000). However, the vision of an inexpensive and sufficiently accurate selective device remains, and as competition stiffens and organizations multiply, so do the devices for personnel selection. A search on the Internet (http://www.google.com, 2002.01.04) produced approximately 1,260,000 hits for the search item 'personnel selection', unfolding a plethora of tricks, tests, and institutions. A more comprehensive review, focusing solely on peer reviewed research on the merits of various methods of personnel selection from 1995 through 1999, is presented by Hough and Oswald (2000). Hough and Oswald conclude, that the field of personnel selection research is healthy and growing, that the "nature and analyses of work behavior" is changing, and that "better taxonomies produced better selection decisions" (ibid.).

Traditionally, the selection of personnel is largely done through management, and it is perhaps thus in the selection of management that costlier selective procedures are justified. The assessment center is among the more complex of these selective procedures, and although "[o]rganizations traditionally used assessment centers for selecting people with potential for lower- and middle-management jobs" (Howard, 1997), they are now used for a great variety of aims, from selective to diagnostic, or even educational purposes.

The assessment center method. The assessment center was introduced in the US in the 1950's, and among the first users was the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) who used the assessment center's simulations in the selection of future undercover agents (Girordo, 1997). The OSS wanted to determine whether candidates would maintain cover under stress and, as described in the 1948 OSS book The Assessment of Men (rendered in ibid.), the OSS staff was largely composed of psychologists who dreamed up an agent that was "a composite of the detective, the cloak-and-dagger heroes acquired from fiction, and psychologists' own untold fantasies" (ibid.) Amusing as this may sound "it informs us of the first systematic efforts at an assessment center approach to selection" (ibid.). Furthermore, a comparison with categories produced by focus groups of law enforcement officials, performed in the mid 1990's, showed that the new

requirements "were surprisingly similar to the dimensions of secret agent success identified by the OSS psychologists 35 years earlier" (ibid.).

The OSS prided itself of never having "lost an agent in the field" (ibid.) and the assessment center method gained wider popularity. Still used for the screening of future undercover operatives (e.g. in law enforcement), assessment centers are now used in almost every type of organization from government to industrial, from educational to military, and even clergy: "Hundreds of thousands of people have been assessed by the method, and it has been the subject of over 100 research and review articles" (Howard, 1997)

What is it? In the assessment center a number of skills, talents, or capacities are measured through simulations, exercises, and tests. The OSS designed the assessment center as a way not only to test the candidates' potential, but also to evaluate the performance itself, something which has remained at the core of the assessment center concept. The simulation is intrinsic to the method: "Job-related simulations, such as in-baskets, group discussions, interaction simulations, and fact-finding exercises, are the hallmark of assessment centers."[1] (Howard, 1997). What separates the assessment center from other combinations of tests and exercises is that the assessment center measures dimensions, or criteria (e.g. leadership, interpersonal qualities, oral performance, and cognitive skills) across several exercises and simulations of future tasks, through the continuous monitoring of candidates by assessors who first make structured observations and then pool their findings, whereas for example the IQ test produces a stand-alone numerical value, and personnel records only describe past performance with rarely enough adherence to a universal structure to allow for further statistical analysis.

Joiner (2000) describes what parts must be included in an assessment center as decided by The 28th International Congress on Assessment Center Methods (here rendered in abbreviated form):

1) Dimensions: a relevant job analysis shall be conducted to result in a list of defined skills, aptitudes, tasks, etc.

2) Techniques: a sufficient number of different techniques must be used to provide information on the candidates, and the techniques must include several simulations.

3) Assessors: multiple assessors must observe and evaluate each candidate in multiple assessments.

4) Gathering and reporting data: the assessors must be properly trained and use systematic scales, checklists, etc. The assessors must also prepare a report on each candidate from each exercise, and finally pool their findings.

The disadvantages of the assessment center. Since the assessment center requires a number of trained assessors, as well as a fair amount of office space to conduct the

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[1] An example of the in-basket simulation: " You have a maximum of 20 minutes to complete this task. Let us pretend you have arrived for work today, Friday, at 8 AM, and you have a number of tasks to prioritize (see items in the in-basket, below, section II). What task would you complete first, second, and so on. If you do not have time to finish today, what task(s) would you leave for tomorrow?" (Wickstrom, 1999)

various exercises, the method is "prone to cost-benefit comparisons with other predictors" (Hough & Oswald, 2000). However, Hough and Oswald (2000) also found evidence that assessment center ratings had a "significant incremental validity over personality variables, and vice versa, when predicting managerial performance" (ibid.).

However, a series of semi-structured interviews with users of assessment centers in Flanders, Belgium revealed that "the main problems occurred with dimension selection and definition, exercise design, using line/staff managers as assessors, distinction between observation and evaluation, and content of assessor training programs" (Lievens & Goemaere, 1999, p. 218). Lievens and Goemaere (1999) found that "it was often very difficult for assessors to learn how to strictly separate observation and evaluation processes" (ibid., p. 217). They also cite Sagie and Magnezy (ibid., p. 218) who found that psychologists discriminated more between dimensions than managers, in the case of using line/staff managers as assessors. Lievens and Goemaere suggested that psychologists "play a key role in assessor teams". (ibid., p. 219) Furthermore, they pointed out that when using behavioral checklists, the assessors do not need to categorize behavior but can rather "concentrate their efforts on observation of relevant behavior" (ibid., p. 219).

Fully in accordance with this, in their review of methods for personnel selection, Hough and Oswald (2000) refer to research in the area and specify which factors affect assessment centers negatively: "Confusion about the constructs being measured, rating errors, type and form of rating procedures, and participant inconsistencies in behavior across exercises are possible explanations" (ibid.). To amend these potential shortcomings Hough and Oswald (2000) suggested the following: "(a) only a few conceptually distinct constructs, (b) concrete, job-related construct definitions, (c) frame-of-reference assessor training with evaluative standards, (d) cross-exercise assessment, and (e) several psychology-trained assessors" (ibid.).

Alternative methods. If the assessment center is all about job simulating exercises, what about the real job performance? Could personnel records not be an inexpensive source of information? Indeed, earlier studies of personnel records have been found to predict performance as effectively as an assessment center (Howard, 1997). However, combining the two methods has produced even better results. Furthermore, Howard (1997) cites several studies that indicate that data on interpersonal relations was missing in personnel evaluations, whereas the assessment center was a good source for this kind of information.

In contrast to personnel records, and of particular interest as a comparison with the present interview study, a 1998 study found greater similarities between self- and assessor ratings than between peer and assessor ratings (Shore & Tetrick, 1998). However, the assessment center can easily be designed to include an interview, exploring candidates' self ratings, and thus encompass this source of information as well. Howard (1997) quotes several studies where the assessment center produced predicting value in the same range as work samples and supervisor/peer evaluations but remarks that a fair comparison with other tests might be difficult since the assessment center might incorporate the competing techniques.

The construct validity problem. Although the assessment center method is seen to work, what makes it work is hard to specify. Even though the centers produce good predictive

value, attempts at statistical analysis appear cumbersome since researchers often find that "research shows more similarity among dimensions rated within one exercise than among the same dimensions rated across exercises" (cf. survey of previous research in Howard, 1997).

One explanation for the apparent lack of construct validity could be ill defined or overlapping dimensions (Howard, 1997), another could be that the assessment centers themselves act as powerful stimuli:

> "The testing literature has documented how powerful assessment center exercises are as stimuli that affect behavior. This is particularly evident in the lack of construct validity found in assessment centers due to the dominance of the simulation exercises over the traits being assessed"
> (Goldstein & Yusko, 1998)

The traditional explanation that assessment centers work through assessors making valid predictions out of systematically collected and pooled data is often criticized. The argument is that if assessors rate more similarly within separate exercises than over all exercises, they rather rate performance on the separate exercises than any constant underlying traits, and this undermines the construct validity of these traits. Howard (1997) suggests a possible remedy for this: first use 'key behaviors'[2] and then, through analysis of the overlap across dimensions, recognize which dimensions would be highly correlated and then modify the dimensions, since a clear-cut differentiation of ratings on very similar or partly overlapping dimension hardly could be expected. "Key behaviors may offer the best hope for cleaner and more precise dimension ratings" (Howard, 1997).

However, "people who assessed their own behavior as changeable or "chameleon-like" are rated more consistently than participants who described themselves as more consistent" (Kuptsch, 1998). In other words, this means better predictive validity for "participants who behave inconsistently than for people who tend to behave consistently. However, this only holds if the demands placed on them by their jobs also vary across situations" (Kuptsch, 1998). Could this observation be linked to ongoing changes in the workplace? Possibly, since Hough and Oswald also point to the need to recognize "the changing nature of work" (Hough & Oswald, 2000).

The advantages of the assessment center. Many researchers report that candidates view the assessment center as fair or even fun (Howard, 1997; Goldstein & Yusko, 1998). The assessment centers might even treat minorities fairer since research has shown that assessment centers tend to have less "Black-White differences than standardized paper and pencil tests" (Goldstein & Yusko, 1998).

In comparison to paper-and-pencil tests "[a]pplicants view work samples and the assessment center as more face valid, acceptable, and fair" (Howard, 1997) This is important, since research has shown that "applicants who perceive selection techniques more favorably are also more satisfied with the selection process, the job, and the organization" (ibid.).

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[2] "Key behaviors (also called key actions) are an alternative to checklists. Approximately three to eight key behaviors characterize a dimension – enough to add structure and reliability but not so many that they distract assessors." (Howard, 1997)

The specific aim of this study

There is controversy as to why assessment centers work, specifically addressing the construct validity of the dimensions used. However, the construct validity of dimensions improves with fewer dimensions and clearer definitions. Several authors repeat the need for fewer and observable dimensions as well as a thorough job analysis.

However, the specific aim of this study was not to investigate why assessment centers work, nor was the aim to probe deeper into the problem of construct validity. While there is abundant research on the construct validity of the assessment center, there seems to be significantly less on the reactions of the candidates who have participated.

Thus, the specific aim of this study was to render a comprehensive review of opinions, impressions and suggestions about the assessment center technique from former assessment center candidates.

However, since this study was to be carried out in a situation where it would be hard to foresee all the possible topics that could emerge, a half-structured interview was chosen, over for example a questionnaire.

Nevertheless, in order to obtain comparable material from interviews with managers who have passed assessment center selection, the following six questions remained the focus throughout all eight interviews.

1) What in the assessment center did you find the most relevant for your current position?
2) What would you say the assessment center tested?
3) What would you suggest be added to the assessment center?
4) What would you suggest be subtracted from the assessment center?
This question was also rephrased:
If you had to subtract anything, what would you suggest that should be?
5) Did you like the assessment center?
6) How was the assessment center in comparison to other methods of selection?

The purpose of this method was to gather material in a qualitative fashion while retaining the possibility of reviewing the material in a form incorporating both qualitative and quantitative features.

METHOD

Subjects

Eight persons were interviewed. The interviewees were selected and contacted with the help of Stig Larsson of Västra Götalandsregionen. All interviewees had passed the assessment center of Västra Götalandsregionen between 1 and 2.5 years ago, and all interviewees held managerial positions in the organization at the time of the interview. Furthermore, the interviewees were selected by Stig Larsson to represent different professions at the various organizational levels in the region where the assessment center is in use (personal communication with Stig Larsson, spring 2002).

Eight mid-level managers in the health care sector volunteered and were interviewed in February and March of 2002. The four women and four men managed organizations of between 1000 and 4 employees with an average of 289 employees.

Changes in the assessment center

The eight persons interviewed have not passed identical assessment centers. Although they have all passed the Västra Götalandsregionen assessment center, the center itself has changed. Stig Larsson listed the following changes:

The dimensions/founding criteria have changed from 8 to 9 after a series of interviews with managers in the region (for a list of criteria see Appendix 2). Some interviewees have passed the older version.

Some exercises have been replaced by others: a group exercise where each attendee should present a candidate for future employment was replaced by a an analyze-and-present-information exercise. Some interviewees have passed the older group exercise.

One motivational questionnaire has been dropped. Some interviewees remembered a questionnaire but did not go into any details.

The structured interview used by the center is under continuous development. Some interviewees have passed an earlier version that focused more on past achievements as manager.

One exercise that changed very early in the development of the center was a mathematical skills test. This was changed from college level to high school level. (*högskoleprovsnivå* to *gymnasienivå*) To my knowledge, none of the persons interviewed have passed the older (more difficult) version.

The post-assessment center feedback is now given in writing as well, whereas in an earlier version it was only given orally in conversational form. Some interviewees have done the older version; other interviewees said they read up on their written feedback to refresh their memory before the interview.

The change in the design of the assessment center is the reason why this study does not to focus on particular exercises, but rather on the assessment center as compared to for example the traditional job interview or a pencil-and-paper test.

Instrument

The instrument was a half-structured interview (see Appendix 1: Questions and accompanying letter in Swedish). In this study, this means three things: first, each interview started with the six main questions, but the freedom to rephrase questions slightly if necessary was retained. Second, emerging topics were followed up. Third, phrasings and emerging topics from earlier interviews were reused in later ones.

Procedure

All interviews lasted approximately one hour. Notes were kept throughout the interviews to keep track of answers and to follow up on new topics of conversation. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

Processing

The written notes were used to gain a cursory overview of the more than eight hours of material. After thus establishing a basic structure, a copy of the transcription was repeatedly sifted through, rearranging the material under topics of conversation. Finally, a number of key words were used to search through the transcribed material with the 'find' function of the word processing program, to double check that nothing had been missed.

All coding, abbreviating and keyword work was done in the interview language (Swedish) after which only quotes were translated. The original Swedish quotes with translations are found in Appendix 2.

The translation of the interviews from Swedish into English

A translation is never perfect. The aim of the translation was to retain the flow of spoken language, in some cases changing idiomatic expressions. This was preferred to a verbatim translation which could have resulted in awkward renderings.

However, the goal to conceal who among the eight interviewees actually uttered what, was further attained through all quotes passing through the same linguistic filter: the translator.

Interviewing and coding

Answering the initial questions led to different topics of interest for all the interviewees. All transcribed material was searched for answers to the six questions, but more than answers to the questions in the transcribed material was found. The solution became to split the results into "Answers to the Initial Questions" and "Emerging Topics". This was done to avoid forcing some material into the slot of a particular question. However,

comparing the answers to questions five and six (general evaluation of the assessment center) revealed so many similarities that it was not meaningful to review them separately.

In representing the impressions and suggestions of the interviewees, the following expressions are used to indicate quantities:

'none' of the interviewees = 0 persons or hearsay
'a few' or 'some' interviewees = 1–3 persons
'half' of the interviewees = 4 persons
'many' or 'most' of the interviewees = 5–7 persons
'all' the interviewees = 8 persons

The words 'more' and 'less' refer to the lower and higher subset respectively. To evaluate the assessment center in numbers, a questionnaire would be preferable. However, that technique would probably never have yielded most of the material found.

RESULTS

Initially all interviews followed the same pattern in one respect: the longer the interview continued the more new topics emerged. All interviews were concluded by repeating the six initial questions to check that no answers had been misunderstood, but for each interview many new topics remained. In the textual rendering, the solution became to split the results into "Answers to the Initial Questions" and "Emerging Topics". However, the answers to questions five and six revealed so many similarities that it was not meaningful to review them separately.

Answers to the Initial Questions

What in the assessment center did you find the most relevant for your current position?

Apart from the fact that one exercise appeared as the most relevant since it was mentioned by all interviewees, the concept of relevance broke down into three facets. One stressed a realistic similarity to the job-situation. Another reflected thoughts on the motives of the test designers. A third was on the assessment center's relevance as a personal stepping stone, something of an eye-opener. For most interviewees the progression of meaning followed this sequence; similarity, motives and personal relevance.

Similarity. The interviewees generally started by describing relevance in terms of comparisons between the assessment center exercises and their present tasks at work. To illustrate how important similarity to real life could appear, a first example:

> *"Should you use assessment at all if you can't get as close to real life as possible, if you have to judge persons?"*

However, far from all interviewees appeared this skeptical. Two more typical examples:

> *"I've had a lot of use for 'the difficult employee' and the group exercise, since I handle a lot of conflict management right now."*

> *"It's never that way with handling conflicts that you can copy one onto the other... But it was realistic... You could spot certain features and that made... It was taken from reality so to speak."*

The exercise all interviewees remembered as relevant was "*the difficult employee*". One example:

> *"You had somebody who really didn't fit in here any more, opinions were heard from co-workers and that person's immediate supervisor. You were supposed to take a stand but if you thought really fast you might identify with one of the roles."*

A 'group exercise' was also frequently mentioned. However, all interviewees had not performed the same group exercise in their respective assessment centers, and in addition to this, a variance in group size was reported. It is therefore not possible to make a fair comparison between the different group exercises and the exercise *the difficult employee*.

Bearing in mind the difficulty to compare one exercise that all interviewees had, and one exercise that was different for some interviewees, none of the group exercises were mentioned as relevant with the same emphasis by as many of the interviewees as the exercise *the difficult employee*. This is what puts the group exercises in second place.

Another way of putting it is that the group exercise was mentioned by all as relevant, but when the interviewees developed their answers, the group exercise received more criticism than the exercise *the difficult employee*. In these answers, the concept of relevance was mainly used to describe a realistic similarity to tasks in the workplace, whereas answers concerning the group exercise involved speculation on the motives of the assessment center designers.

Motives. Having mentioned *the difficult employee* and the group exercise, mostly in terms of similarity to the workplace, the interviewees began to separate exercises that reminded them of everyday job situations, from exercises they perceived as tests. The interviewees went from comparing factual differences between the center and work, to speculating on the motives of the assessment center designers and the forces they catered to. Two typical examples:

> *"All that other stuff I went through at the assessment center really was for the others to get a picture of me, to check if I lived up to... Fit the image the organization had stated as the desired profile for their kind of management."*

> *"Assessment is a mirror of our times. People want rapid management or something like that. They have adapted their tools to the demands of today. It's in the air, all this testing, etc. It's not the old style; he who is the oldest, or been with the firm the longest, gets the job."*

A personal stepping stone. In talking about the relevance of the assessment center the word relevance was used in different senses, meaning similarity, or motives; for some interviewees the word relevance was also used to signify a necessary personal stepping stone.

The latter interviewees said they had doubts whether they would enjoy working as managers, or that they had difficulty picturing themselves in that position. These interviewees said that the assessment center played a part in the making of a new manager. Two examples:

> *"I got confirmation of some of what I already felt myself. For example: do you really want to be a manager?"*

> *"The crux, as I saw it, was that you could picture this from many different angles and eventually from the position of management. How would you proceed as the manager? That was what was good about this exercise. I'm really quite impulsive, but when you realized why you were supposed to do this exercise, I at least went through a series of phases, different roles... arriving at the role of the manager."*

In sum. The assessment center exercises seemed to be perceived as more relevant the more they conveyed the personal experience of acting the manager's role.

What would you say the assessment center tested?

In recollecting the assessment center, all interviewees remembered being tested for mathematical and verbal skills. However, they talked more about being assessed for aspects of personality. Another common theme was the experience of having learned something about oneself. Furthermore, there were many reflections on the fact that speed was an issue in the assessment, as well as on the level of difficulty. All interviewees also touched upon the subject of the number of criteria or dimensions used for designing the test.

Skills and personality. Whereas all interviewees started by recollecting that they had been tested for verbal skills and skills in mathematics, most interviewees focused on the assessment of personality. Some examples:

> *"It measures many personal qualities, if you are at all cut out to be a manager."*

> *"Self-evaluation is revealed, how you act, how you interact. The difference between self-evaluation and actual behavior. Parameters: comprehensive overview, analytic ability, interest in management."*

> *"It was about social and communicative ability, talking to others, the ability to convey information, the ability to absorb information. That's perhaps the most important of what was tested."*

Learning from impressions. After mentioning which exercises they remembered, the interviewees commented on their impressions of the results on different exercises. Half of the interviewees reported that they were surprised by some of the results, having

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done better in fields they did not expect and vice versa. Nearly all reported having learned something.

The time limit. All interviewees reflected on the fact that speed was a factor in many exercises. A few interviewees lingered especially on the subject of stress, expressing different feelings of discomfort. Their answers ranged from mild suggestions of possibly extending the assessment center to more days than one, to direct statements, for example:

> *"I think it focuses too much on speed"*

> *"When the time was up, that was the end of it. That's the way it was. Regardless if I had understood anything or not. They weren't interested in that."*

However, most interviewees said they saw a point in the time limit. Another example:

> *"I grew desperate since I didn't find time to complete everything... but it's like the Scholastic Aptitude Test, very few complete all the exercises. That was tested very well, the point was to stay collected."*

Level of difficulty. All interviewees made some comment on the level of difficulty, and these comments focused particularly on the skill exercises. Many of the interviewees did not find the skill exercises too hard, and whereas a few interviewees found parts of the skill exercises slightly challenging given the amount of time at hand, they argued that they saw a point in this.

In contrast, a few interviewees apparently found some of the exercises so easy that they doubted if they were being tested at all. One of the latter commented on the mathematics test as *"that math-play"*. One example:

> *"I really didn't perceive it as a... Criterion... for selection, for what we were discussing at the time. If that had been the case, you should have felt insulted."*

The number of criteria. All interviewees said that they had been told what criteria the assessment center was based on. However, most interviewees hesitated slightly when stating how many criteria had been used.

A few interviewees remembered it as being between 7-10 criteria, the rest reported around four.

However, when specifically asked to name or describe the criteria involved, most interviewees only described around four or five criteria.

All versions of the assessment center were based on eight to nine criteria. (For full list of criteria, see Appendix 2).

In sum. The interviewees said they were tested for skills and aspects of personality. A few interviewees found some exercises too easy and expressed skepticism. A few others found some exercises too hard, given the amount of time at hand. However, most interviewees saw a point in both the level of difficulty and the time frame.

No interviewee remembered exactly the number of criteria that the assessment center was based on, and when naming the criteria most interviewees named fewer than the designers listed in the description of the assessment center.

What would you suggest be added to the assessment center?

All interviewees thought a manager's personality was a decisive factor, and all interviewees recognized several attempts to probe personality in the assessment center. All interviewees expressed thoughts on qualities they appreciated or criticized in a manager. Many interviewees brought up the theme of stress in combination with self control. Some interviewees outlined different views, or perspectives, on the tasks in the workplace.

Personality tests. Whereas half of the interviewees thought aspects of personality were probably being tested as well as possible and offered tentative excuses for the assessment center such as lack of time, difficulties to obtain such knowledge at all, etc., the other half of the interviewees expressed a contrasting opinion, saying they lacked a proper personality test or deeper interview, thus implying that the assessment center they had experienced was not thorough enough.

     The latter, more critical interviewees were more outspoken; their suggestions ranged between comments such as that the personality test could be passed too easily, or that the interview focused too much on past achievements. The most critical interviewees expressed skepticism that the existing techniques would produce any interesting information on deeper personality structure. Many of the more critical interviewees thought somebody unfit to be a manager could slip through the assessment center. Examples:

> *"It is always difficult, because in a pure job interview you do pick up psychopaths more than you pick up the rest - simply because they're so charming. They create an immediate contact, you grow fond of them instantly. But I think that if you have a whole day at your disposal you could have a few exercises that go under the surface a bit more. I think you could focus more on personality, maybe at the expense of the focus on skills. Because it [the assessment center] is very focused on skills. Even social skills are skills, it is something that could be learnt: what is socially acceptable behavior, how you behave in an interview situation, and everything."*

> *"Furthermore, surely a sociopath or a psychopath could do well on an assessment as well. I don't know. I personally believe you could lie your way through some exercises and get away with it."*

Not all of the critical interviewees saw a solution in personality tests, even among those who had said that a psychopath could slip through. One example:

> *"Personality tests are often very inaccurate. I think assessment draws a significantly better picture than sending someone to a consulting psychologist who does three tests and gives an evaluation of what sort of person it was."*

Interviewees with personal experience of recruiting or testing referred to their previous work when they expressed wishes for new exercises or criticized lack of stringency in the assessment center they had experienced. One example:

> *"They had a small personality test as well and it appeared a bit too superficial... There is usually a thorough personality test in the field of psychiatry, something*

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which has to be administered by trained personnel and which yields many interpretations. And then a consulting firm takes this test, redesigns it, simplifies it. They send accountants on a two week course after which they're assessors. Much fewer degrees of freedom, it becomes more of a Readers Digest test instead. "More than five points equals good manager, less equals not so good, and if you only get two points: consider another profession... But in a way, I do think the discussion around that test was pretty good later, afterwards. But at the time I was doing it I thought it felt really simplified."

Empathy and self restraint. Those interviewees who did not talk about previous experiences from personality testing, expressed their need to spot a capacity for empathy among management candidates in another way:

"From what I can see, it is a pretty large group of managers and they all have different attitudes, labeling their staff differently. I have learned to regard my staff as my co-workers, I don't refer to them as how many 'heads' I command."

Another expression of a similar need:

"How to obtain that team spirit, somehow, that's something I don't think they got out in the assessment center. They ought to add that."

Another approach hinted more at the aspect of self-restraint:

"I don't know how you could pick that up in an assessment center really, the different parts that dominate your personality, that's important. To be able to control those that could hurt people. If I get mad I can say things I wouldn't if I had slept on it. You do get mad but you don't have to say... To deal with it just then..."

All interviewees in some way mentioned that the quality of empathy and the capacity for self-restraint must be assessed in the center. Some interviewees speculated on what kind of person could pass the assessment center without revealing failures in these qualities, others expressed it by hinting at poorly equipped managers they had previous experience of.

Stress. Roughly half the interviewees emphasized the challenge of self control under stress, expressing the need for this to be included in the assessment center. All but a few interviewees pointed out that the daily tasks of health care management involved high levels of stress, and as a few interviewees phrased it, when suggesting requirements for an added exercise, not solely the stress but the challenge of leaving some tasks half done:

"Another thing would be that to handle too great a workload, I have to leave out stuff that's the least crucial. An exercise to deal with sorting out what doesn't have to be done and concentrating on the most important. That, I think, for my position would have been an incredibly relevant sorting criterion. An assignment that sorts out those who tend to get stuck with the first task they get. Those who feel they have to play every ball. Or the ability to leave stuff half-well-done - or almost-done – if necessary, to finish their daily quota. This really is not a part of Swedish white-collar culture, but it is absolutely crucial for my position. To be able to let go of tasks when they're not quite done. That's something I know is a problem for lots of people."

> *"To get more relevance for my tasks at work, I would have put in more in-basket exercises or something like that."*

However, not all interviewees voiced the need for stressful exercises. Another example:

> *"It never happens that you have to do it in such a terrible... to read it all; You have to do this, and you have to produce a suggestion to this. I never do that in real life."*

The above is also an example of how, in a few cases, the interviewees expressed discomfort with assessment exercises dealing with stress in a way that was hard to separate from for example frustration build-up at work. This is a relevant suspicion since half the interviewees were critical of the amount of stress at work to the point were they voiced skepticism that the stress would be harmful to the quality of their work. One example:

> *"How could we get time to see things in the long term when we have short-term problems to solve. This is definitely a problem, and you have to make people aware of the difference between long-term and short-term views. I think you have to work on this, because you're so busy with tasks that you want to solve right away, to get on with the problems of tomorrow, that there is no time. The time for reflection is lacking. You don't take that time, and for management, I think it's really important that you do."*

Perspective. All interviewees mentioned stress in some fashion. However, as indicated above, a few interviewees made a connection between the stress and a capacity to use different time perspectives. These interviewees talked about developing tasks over a long period of time (half a year or months, as opposed to days and hours) The theme of the long-term perspective appeared in both personal accounts and examples from staff experiences.

In sum. Combining the suggestions from all the interviewees, the ability to manage in an empathic, team-building manner, even when forced into making decisions under high levels of stress, not losing sight of the long-term perspective, should be evaluated in the assessment center.

A deeper interview was requested by roughly half of the interviewees, and the rest mentioned a more unspecified need to look deeper into the personality of candidates. However, all interviewees did request an assessment of self-control, capacity for empathy, and the capacity for team building, but in different ways.

Most interviewees talked about the high levels of stress and half the interviewees specifically asked for an assessment center exercise that evaluated the ability to deal with decision-making in a stressful environment.

A few interviewees spoke of the need for a long-term perspective.

What would you suggest be subtracted from the assessment center?

All interviewees proposed something to be subtracted, but many interviewees did this with some hesitation. Furthermore, this was the fourth question in the interview, and all

interviewees who had suggestions on what could be subtracted from the assessment center had mentioned this in other ways earlier in the interview.

Partly because many of the interviewees suggested their subtractions with hesitation, and partly because their suggestion had been mentioned earlier and thus had to be repeated, this question was asked in two forms for all interviewees:

a) What would you suggest be subtracted from the assessment center?
b) If you had to subtract anything, what would you suggest that should be?

Some interviewees commented that the interview focused on past achievements. A few interviewees discussed the possible use of school grades, especially if they had to subtract anything. Furthermore, some exercises were commented upon as possibly rendering too few outcomes. The group exercise was commented on by a few interviewees, both generally and specifically. Some interviewees commented on the professional level of the assessors.

Past achievements. The earlier versions of the assessment center, experienced by some of the interviewees, had an interview focusing on past accomplishments. This interview is under constant development and now focuses on other issues (personal communication with Stig Larsson, spring 2002).

However, some interviewees suggested that this interview be replaced by another kind of interview, by a professional, trained in the behavioral sciences, since they deemed the interview they had experienced to be too shallow.

Grades instead of tests. A few interviewees suggested that perhaps records of school grades could replace the numerical test. However, more interviewees thought aloud about the written tests, speculating on what really was being tested. One example:

> *"I think maybe you could dispose of the math thing, the reading/writing, there are grades and stuff. But then again, it wasn't just a language test. It dealt with reading and understanding information. And that is important stuff."*

If you had to subtract anything, what would you suggest that should be? When specifically asked what the interviewees would consider removing - if they really had to remove something – the mathematics and the reading parts were mentioned most often, but still with some hesitation:

> *"You cannot disregard the skill factor - reading and writing - not if you can't assess that in some other way. But you should be able to assess it through grades or references or something."*

Only two choices. Other exercises were suggested for removal by some interviewees who reacted against their construction. A few interviewees suggested that *the difficult employee* and the presentation exercise could be removed or modified since they were too bipolar. One thought that *the difficult employee* was too dependent on getting it either right or wrong from the beginning. Another suggested the removal of a presentation exercise, replacing it with an in-basket exercise for similar reasons:

> *"What could you remove? The presentation exercise could be removed. An in-*

> *basket exercise would yield more. An in-basket is better 'cause in the presentation exercise you can only choose between two options, whereas in-baskets contain many more options."*

Another interviewee wanted to replace the presentation exercise on other grounds, saying that this exercise tested the ability to handle stress at the expense of testing for other qualities.

> *"I suggest you remove – if possible – the stress factor. Because I think that puts emphasis on all the wrong qualities."*

Unease in group exercises. Discomfort was created not only by stress. Some interviewees complained about the group they were in. Either they had had to compete for the same position with people they already knew, or there were other problems with the composition of the group. One example, where an interviewee would have preferred to change the composition of the group:

> *"Group exercises are an Achilles' heel, the group I ended up in, when we should discuss whom we should employ, was difficult. Had I been in charge, I would simply not have wanted certain persons in my group. I mean, by the end of the discussion they claimed that their candidate was preferable since he was of 'good family'."*

The exercise where each candidate should propose a prospective employee is not in use anymore, and competition for the same position among staff that know each other is also something that is avoided (personal communication with Stig Larsson, spring 2002). However, a question is to what extent group composition can be perfected. One example:

> *"Furthermore, it was a selection where everyone present applied for a managerial position. You don't get any natural roles. Everybody wants to stand at the helm but nobody wants to row the boat."*

However, more interviewees were reluctant to simply embrace group exercises for other reasons.

> *"The group exercise is not necessarily the truth. The topic could make you withdraw. - I am often hesitant at first in group exercises. – And I'm not so sure that inappropriate behavior is exposed, and group exercises do discriminate against possible shy candidates."*

> *"Since it is a simulated reality... wannabe actors will be favored and shy persons will be disfavored."*

> *"Sure, a few could probably walk right through it, but if you have difficulties with social skills, you will have trouble as a manager as well. 'Cause if you can't handle these situations... This is not about being shy or withdrawn and having to function as a manager. If you can't handle this situation, you can't handle being the manager. It is not more difficult for them, they really don't live up to the demands, if they drop out for that reason."*

Bad assessors. A few complained about bad assessors. One example:

> *"I'll have to regard that person as a very professional individual in what he's*

In sum. Although initially often answered with some hesitation, this question gave rise to many thoughts and suggestions.

If something really had to go, most interviewees suggested the reading and writing skills go first. However, on reflection, most interviewees withdrew that suggestion, expressing thoughts on what was being tested at the same time.

A few interviewees expressed discomfort about stress, but almost all said that the same stress was an intrinsic part of their daily tasks. More importantly, no one claimed that the ability to excel under stress should be favored over and above all other qualities.

Some interviewees saw limitations in exercises with only two possible outcomes.

Some interviewees had negative experiences of their group exercises in ways that apparently already are being dealt with (personal communication with Stig Larsson, spring 2002).

Others pointed at the weak spots of group exercises, the composition of the group and how some exercises favor people with acting talents. However, on reflection, many interviewees saw the social skills involved as vital.

A few interviewees stressed the importance of the highest level of professional edge among the assessors.

Did you like the assessment center? and
How was the assessment center in comparison to other methods of selection?

Questions 5 and 6 are reviewed together since all interviewees answered them in combination. That is, in talking about the assessment center the interviewees most often compared it to other methods of selection, real or hypothetical.

The interviewees all had positive memories of the assessment center to some extent. The more critical interviewees tended to be slightly more outspoken. However, many interviewees saw the assessment center as a complement to other methods of personnel selection, focusing on the number of assessors and tests.

General attitude. All of the interviewees said they liked the assessment center to some extent. Some interviewees said they were somewhat nervous since there was much at stake, but that it still was exciting. Half of the interviewees said that they generally did well on tests or in competitions, the other half were not as outspoken, but all interviewees said that they had positive memories, ranging from mild tolerance to outspoken praise. Examples illustrating the range from the positive to the negative:

> *"I think a well developed assessment center is very good. I would like everyone who is appointed manager to do an assessment center."*
> *"*
> *"I found it fun and exciting, I was not like nervous beforehand."*

> *"So, to a certain extent I think it focuses on the wrong items, but on the other hand, I thought they were testing exciting fields."*

Direct criticism. The more critical interviewees often wondered if it was not possible to collect this type of information about a person in another fashion. But many, even the more critical ones, appeared hesitant to express criticism if they could not suggest a better alternative:

> *"Since I can't present something else, I can feel that it might be bad form to say that the level was too low, without myself stating that you should include this, and it should have been like this."*

Some interviewees uttered occasional derogatory remarks, e.g. referring to the center as 'game' or 'play', or complaints on the lack of professionalism of some assessor, calling him a 'jerk'. Although these were scattered remarks in spoken conversation and are perhaps best dismissed as jargon, they do contribute to a picture of mild discontent, focusing on the quality of the center these interviewees had passed.

In addition, the same interviewees all expressed skepticism that the assessment center really could spot top candidates. One example:

> *"I think it is a too blunt an instrument, suited to sort out the really inappropriate candidates. However, if you have two or three persons that could be good, it will be really hard to find those qualities in an assessment."*

A complement. Regardless if they were positive or negative, many interviewees said that the assessment center was a good complement but perhaps not sufficient as the sole evaluation of character or competence. Roughly half of the interviewees said they enjoyed competing in general. A few interviewees regarded the assessment center as a bit below their level – especially those with more extensive experience of other, more provocative, tests. One example:

> *"But you must take it for what it is, that's the bottom line. You shouldn't really praise it as a wonderful instrument. But it is better than nothing. It'll still convey a tiny piece of information to the person who's about to employ someone, I think."*

However, even if they had previously criticized the assessment center, most interviewees spoke in comparative terms about it in a positive way:

> *"[It] Collects information in an entirely different fashion, in a broader way. As I perceive it."*

Many assessors and many tests. Most of the interviewees emphasized that the good thing about the assessment center was that it had featured many different exercises where many different assessors were employed. Some examples:

> *"There were many candidates – and many assessors too. And on some exercises there were many candidates who interacted with each other. And sometimes there were different assessors who checked up on different things during the same exercise, at the same time, who talked to each other. And they mixed it so that each candidate got a different assessor on the different exercises. There were different*

> *persons who could express an opinion on different qualities they wanted to assess. That, I think seems professional.”*
>
> *”It is also that... The advantage of this is that you have six different persons who meet the individual in different situations.”*
>
> *”So they had the same variable assessed in two or three exercises. In the whole test, that's something I think they did well.”*

In sum. All interviewees had something positive to say and half of the interviewees appeared very positive. Some sounded a bit reluctant but claimed they had 'had a good time', and a few expressed polite skepticism, commenting encouragingly on the ambition of the assessment center designers.

Many thought the assessment center collected information in a very broad way, and half the interviewees said they appreciated being assessed by many different assessors.

Most interviewees said they remembered the day at the assessment center as exciting, and many said they remembered the assessors as encouraging and stimulating.

Emerging Topics

While the interviewees answered the initial questions, remembered the assessment center experience, and compared it to the workplace, several topics appeared that did not fit the somewhat narrow slot of one answer to one question. These emerging topics are reviewed here.

The interviewees spoke both of topics related to the assessment center and of topics more closely related to experiences from the workplace. The two themes were easily distinguishable, and are reviewed separately under the subsections "Ideas related to the assessment center", and "Impressions from the workplace".

Ideas related to the assessment center

Some interviewees spoke of the need for the assessment center procedures to be kept secret. Some thought the assessment center was too easy. Furthermore, some interviewees spoke of the assessment center's potential as an educational device. Some interviewees raised the topic of the feedback the assessment center had provided, comparing it to the feedback available in the workplace.

Secrecy. Some thought it important that the procedures of the assessment center be kept secret. One example:

> *“I think that if you know the details beforehand, that could ruin some of the results.”*

However, not many had had any knowledge of the center beforehand. On a few occasions hearsay about who had seen the material in advance surfaced, but more common were interviewees who expressed that they had not been briefed in any detail

on the reasons for taking this test, or the background of the method, or the criteria. In addition, the same interviewees often remembered the actual assessment center experience as positive.

A need to stratify. Some of the interviewees expressed the view that the assessment center they had seen was too easy. One example:

> *"As a selective, or evaluative, device it is probably the kindest one I've passed."*

Nevertheless, to raise the overall level of difficulty of the assessment center might not be the answer, since a number of other interviewees complained about lack of time, the feeling of having been neglected, etc.

The assessment center as an educational device. All interviewees reported that they had learned something in the assessment center. More than half the interviewees reported that the assessment center experience had been an eye-opener of some sort. These interviewees each named particular exercises where they had been surprised by the results and thus learned something. One example:

> *"To recognize your level of maturity. I thought I was really good at this and that, but in reality I was good at other stuff. It is a maturing experience."*

Second to the educating effects of the assessment center, the feedback session after the completed assessment center was seen as the most positive experience among many of the interviewees who also suggested other uses for the assessment center than recruitment. One example:

> *"If you're not out to pick future management, if that's not the prime objective... I think that most of all you could use it to cast a light on personal relations to others within an organization. How you treat your neighbor, so to speak."*

All interviewees reported having learned something at the assessment center. Some suggested the assessment center as a diagnostic tool for conflict management and education.

More feedback. Whereas all interviewees were very positive to the feedback after the assessment center, some interviewees remarked on the more or less pronounced silence a year or two afterwards. One example:

> *"One thing I've been thinking about since that time... they have never wanted a follow-up anytime. It's like it was a shot in the dark they made."*

While half the interviewees did comment on a manager's relative loneliness, the personal need for acknowledgement seemed to vary among the interviewees. One example:

> *"I think each person has a different need to hear that the thing you did was good, that you've been a good person. Some of us manage pretty well without anyone saying that."*

Whereas the feedback included in the existing assessment center apparently was appreciated, some interviewees expressed the need for a continuous feedback.

In sum. Some interviewees thought that the assessment center material had to be kept secret. Some interviewees found some exercises too easy. Many interviewees said the assessment center had been something of an eye-opener. Some interviewees commented that they lacked the feedback of the assessment center in the workplace.

Impressions from the workplace

As well as sharing many impressions from the assessment center, all interviewees also described the workplace. Many interviewees offered insights in the day to day tasks of the mid-level manager.

Examples of the difficulties of the mid-level manager included: the need to know yourself, the problem of dual loyalties, and occasionally the problem of having more tasks added. A few interviewees reflected on the reality of power.

Impressions of difficulties facing the mid-level manager. Many interviewees described the job as a mid-level manager as being in an exposed position. When talking about stress, several varieties surfaced. The most common impression was stress resulting from shortage of time (as mentioned above under suggested exercises to be added to the assessment center). Another was stress resulting from shortage of funds, as partly mentioned above, for example when discussing the ability to leave things half-well done. A third was being alone with one's experience of stress. A few examples, the first emphasizing the need to know yourself:

> *"As the manager you are more exposed. I mean: as an employee you can do your part and go home. But as the manager you are put on a small elevated hill somewhere for everybody to... You are very clearly exposed. So if you don't have good self-knowledge you can get really hurt... And if you don't know what's driving you and what you're really after I think you will have great trouble leading others. If you don't know yourself pretty well. And I think very few do. And that goes for the manager as well"*

One example focusing on dual loyalties:

> *"I am loyal to my staff, but at the same time I am the top management's long arm reaching into the enterprise. Then comes a decree: 'carry out this.' Something you might not even be involved in. And might not really care for that much. But you still have the obligation to carry it out. And that means dual loyalties."*

One example of the need for strength:

> *"If I sat down and cried because two people argue, then nobody would feel any trust or confidence in me. Not that it's happened. But that's the sort of strength you must have."*

A few interviewees complained that in their already stressful situation at work, more tasks were added, sometimes tasks that they did not have any formal training for.

> "The worst for me personally, is that my tasks often lie far, far away from what was addressed by the assessment center, or the initial training. They add more and more administration. Finally I'll end up an administration clerk. Someone who sits in some room and doesn't see what's going on, and doesn't have any time to check. 'How's my staff doing?'. 'How are things in the department?' And I don't want that... I'll turn into a pretty expensive payroll assistant."

Another few interviewees complained that a few highly qualified persons in their department reached their own goals but that the department as a whole failed in reaching the common goal.

However, most of the interviewees returned to the need for trust and the ability to create an environment where the employees trusted the management and each other. Many also spoke of the importance of not being isolated in an exposed position. Some had gotten a mentor through their employer, and some had made an arrangement with somebody to confide in themselves. All those who had somebody to talk to said that this was essential in order to function well at the job. Some said that they doubted if they would function at all without somebody to confide in.

The Reality of Power. More than half of the interviewees spoke of the responsibilities that came with the position as manager. Many spoke of the pressure and the stress. Some reflected on the reality of power, but only a few called it by name. One example:

> "Power is a word I rarely think about. But at the same time you shouldn't be unaware that you have it as the manager. Before I became the manager I could say something, and the day after I was made manager, the same thing carried a totally different weight, and that, I think, is really important to be aware of."

In sum. The interviewees described several varieties of stress particularly facing the mid-level manager. A few interviewees reflected on the reality of power.

DISCUSSION

This study was not designed to draw any conclusions on the effectiveness of the assessment center as a method. Neither was the aim of this study to specifically probe deeper into the known problem of construct validity in assessment centers. The overall aim of this study was to render a comprehensive review of opinions, impressions and suggestions about the assessment center technique from former assessment center candidates.

However, completing this work has generated several questions. First, the problem of the selection of the interviewees: this study only dealt with eight interviewees, all of whom had passed the assessment center. What would interviews with more candidates, or the possible inclusion of candidates who had failed, yield?

Second, some gender-related differences were noted among the interviewees. Third, although the problem of construct validity was not specifically addressed, related issues were noted in that only a few interviewees remembered the same number of dimensions. Four, how could the suggestive elements of the assessment center affect the assessors? Five, some interviewees reflected on the importance of acting talents, or social skills, to what extent could candidates' possible acting talents or social skills interfere with an interview on the assessment center? Six, what effects could the use of the assessment center have back in the workplace? Seven, what possible effects could an extensive use of psychologists have in the selection of management in a health care environment?

Based on these topics, a list of fields for future research is presented.

Selection

The selection of the interviewees for this study is not without implications. A few examples of where the selection of interviewees particularly may influence the results:

First, this study has only dealt with eight interviewees. Second, all interviewees have not passed identical assessment centers. Third, among the interviewed some of those who criticized the assessment center also claimed that they did not get top points. Four, even if the former candidates scored differently on the assessment center, they had all succeeded in attaining the position the applied for. Five, in this study more men than women held top positions.

To what extent could these issues bias a review of opinions, impressions and suggestions on the assessment center? One way to find out could e.g. be to conduct reference studies of candidates who did not pass the assessment center, to conduct interviews with a greater number of candidates who have passed identical centers, as well as to calibrate the sample of interviewees as per gender and rank in the organization.

Gender

When criticizing the assessment center more men than women used derogatory terms, such as, 'game', 'play' and 'jerk'. When the women in this study criticized the assessment center, the strongest critique expressed was that it did not resemble reality enough. Moreover, only men criticized the center for being too easy. However, the men held higher positions than the women.

This subject touches on the considerably larger issue of the proportion of men versus women in top management, something I believe has less to do with assessment center studies, than tradition, politics, etc. However, assessment centers have been pointed out as fairer (Howard, 1997; Goldstein & Yusko, 1998) than other forms of selection. Further research is suggested on whether this is the case for both men and women.

Criteria/dimensions

When recalling the criteria, no single interviewee remembered the exact number that Västra Götalandsregionen (VGR) said they had based their center on. When going into

depth on the separate criteria, most interviewees only mentioned four or five criteria. Yet, in the totality of their replies, all factors listed as criteria by VGR were touched upon by each interviewee in some fashion.

If it is possible that abstract criteria, open to interpretation, will be remembered as fewer than they really were among former candidates, it is also possible that the same criteria will overlap in the eyes of the assessors.

Although not necessarily yielding a more imperfect ranking of candidates, an uncontrolled criteria overlap could certainly result in a problem of construct validity, one center not being identical to the other. What effects would a short, clear, list of key behaviors or actions have?

The forces of imagination

Bearing in mind that the very first working assessment centers were largely a product of the imagination of the designing psychologists (Girordo, 1997), it is also true that one of the reasons for the lack of construct validity can be traced to assessors failing to separate the evaluation and observation processes (Lievens & Goemaere, 1999). Hough and Oswald (2000) also find that confusion about dimensions may impair the performance of the assessment center.

A fair guess would be that even if the imaginative powers of assessment center designers is a great asset, construct validity could fail where the assessors let go of checklists and dimensional ratings, allowing themselves to be drawn into the suggestive situation. However, this study has not been designed to specifically deal with the problem of construct validity, for this further research is suggested.

Acting talents

Some interviewees expressed concern that it was possible to fake or lie your way through an assessment center. The prerequisites suggested were acting talents, or the personality profile of a psychopath. However, on reflection many interviewees also said that such aspects of personality as being sociable and outgoing were also needed to function as a manager.

I see two possibilities of distortion: on the one hand interviewing the most sociable candidates may distort the interviews, since these candidates might aim to please. On the other hand, a too stimulating assessment center may provoke candidates into acting. In both scenarios the required outgoing personality, or acting talent, remains at the core: either the assessment center selects dormant actors, or the assessment center produces temporary actors. How could this be investigated?

The first problem: Is it possible to obtain valid data from candidates selected for their extraordinary outgoing qualities in the interview form, a form that depends on personal interaction? The solution might rest in other forms of investigation, less influenced by personal interaction (e.g. a questionnaire).

The second problem: is it possible to make a valid selection of candidates if the assessment center is perceived as more stimulating than the workplace? The solution might be to incorporate a test for faking in the assessment center. Some personality

inventories (e.g. MMPI) have an ability to detect faking. A topic for future research could be to see in what aspects assessment center performance differs from that of the workplace and what measures could be taken to amend this.

Possible reactions in the workplace

Pressure exerted on a reactive system may produce a counterpressure, or a "process of interaction or mechanism which balances various influences and effects such that a stable state or a stable behavior is maintained" (Heylighen, 2001). There is a possibility that back in the workplace, the provoked interaction could take the form of rumors of, or skepticism toward, the assessment center technique, to preserve homeostasis.

This hypothesis is founded on the, albeit slight, speculations around the assessment center that seemed to vary in intensity between the workplaces of the interviewees, in some correlation to the number of persons sent to assessment centers from that particular site. Further research could include: what reactions in the workplace could the use of assessment centers provoke? Furthermore, what effects could an implicit rule of keeping the assessment center procedures secret have?

Psychologists

Some of the interviewees as well as some of the reference literature suggest the use of psychologists in the assessment center (Hough & Oswald, 1997; Lievens & Goemaere, 1999). However, when selecting management in the health care sector this might not be entirely unproblematic for the following reasons.

The health care sector is not infrequently reported as a somewhat conservative environment. Psychologists are traditionally rarely found in health care top management. Thus, extensive use of psychologists in the selection of health care management, through their participation in the assessment center, might appear incongruous to traditional values of the health care sector. Following this hypothesis, health care managers viewed as selected by psychologists could suffer problems of legitimacy among the staff.

Future research

The following fields could be subject for future study:

Reactions to the assessment center (AC)
What would an investigation of a greater number of former candidates who passed the same version of the AC yield?
What would an investigation of a greater number of former candidates who failed the same version of the AC yield?
What are the relations between results on an AC, and the candidates' impressions of it?
To what extent do preconceived notions of the AC affect the result?

Gender
Do ACs treat men and women more equally than other tests?
All other factors being equal: do men and women react differently to the AC, for example by using different expressions when formulating criticism of the assessment center?

Assessment center design
What factors affect the optimal number of criteria (dimensions) of an AC?
What are the effects of a list of key actions (key behaviors) on AC construct validity?
In what ways might the suggestive situation of the AC affect the assessors?
In what aspects does the performance in an AC differ from the performance on the job and how can the AC be altered to predict this?

Interaction
In what ways do candidates who have passed ACs perform differently in interviews?
How might information, or secrecy, on the AC technique influence the workplace?
What effects could the use of the AC technique have, back in the workplace?
Is there a relation between hierarchical position at work and derogatory criticism of the AC?

Status
How would the extensive use of a specific health care profession (e.g. psychologists) in AC design affect the legitimacy of the selected managers in an health care environment?

In Conclusion

Most interviewees had positive memories of their assessment center experience. Some interviewees found the assessment center too easy. Many interviewees suggested exercises that were not part of the assessment center they had experienced, or additional use of the assessment center. Many ideas for further research emerged.

The assessment center seemed to be perceived as more relevant the more it conveyed the personal experience of acting the manager's role.

The most common suggestions for additional use of assessment centers were as diagnostic tools for workplaces and the use of assessment centers as educational devices.

Many interviewees suggested that the ability to make decisions under stress should be added to the assessment center. This was suggested in a variety of ways, but the collective ideal put forth by the interviewees was the ability to maintain empathic behavior and a capacity for team building, even under heavy stress.

Another manifest theme was the positive memories of feedback. This factor was connected to a more or less clearly expressed desire to be recognized in the workplace and not only in the assessment center.

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Appendix 1: Questions and accompanying letter in Swedish

Hej

Först vill jag tacka för att ni har möjlighet att ställa upp för en timmes intervju, jag vet att ni är mycket upptagen och jag uppskattar verkligen att ni hjälper mig.

Lite information om mig själv, bakgrunden och vad materialet ska användas till: Jag heter Jacob Stålhammar, jag är 34 år gammal och jag läser sista året på GBG universitets psykologprogram.

I början av år 2001 kontaktade Stig Larsson Psykologiska institutionen med en förfrågan om att vetenskapligt undersöka de kriterier som användes i Västra Götalandsregionens assessmentcenter. Jag skrev då tillsammans med en studiekamrat, Egle Öhman, en rapport där vi beskrev hur kriterierna stämde överens med samtida forskning. Därefter diskuterade jag och Stig en uppföljning med intervjuer av personer som genomgått Västra Götalandsregionens assessmentcenter. Som mitt examensarbete på psykologprogrammet gör jag så denna intervjustudie. Min handledare är Kerstin Karlsson.

Intervjuerna kommer att bandas, eftersom det underlättar arbetet med att sammanställa era synpunkter, dessutom kommer citat att användas i resultatredovisningen. Materialet kommer att redovisas på ett sådant sätt att ingen enskild persons synpunkter går att härleda till en bestämd person. Som exempel kan nämnas att ni som grupp endast beskrivs som "personer som genomgått Västra Götalandsregionens assessmentcenter och nu fått den anställning de sökte".

Uppsatsen beräknas vara klar i april och alla deltagare ska naturligtvis få en kopia. Antingen kan jag maila den som PDF dokument (svar på mail bekräftar att er adress är riktig) och/eller i pappersform (och för det behöver jag en postadress). Är det något ni undrar över kan jag nås på tfn: 031 16 26 29/ 0707 20 53 67, eller mail jacs@algonet.se.

Återigen ett stort tack för hjälpen.

Mvh / Jacob Stålhammar

Frågor:
1) Vad i assessmentcentret tycker du var mest relevant för det du gör nu?
b) På vilket sätt?

2) Vad skulle du säga att assessmentcentret testade?
b) På vilket sätt då?

3) Med den erfarenhet du har nu, vad skulle du föreslå att man ladetill assessmentcentret?
b) Varför ?

4) Vad skulle du föreslå att man tog bort från assessmentcentret?
b) Varför?

5) Vad tyckte du om assessmentcentret?

6) Vad tycker du om assessmentcentret i jämförelse med andra urvalsmetoder?

Frågor

1) What in the assessment center did you find the most relevant for your current position?

1) Vad i assessmentcentret tycker du var mest relevant för det du gör nu?

b) På vilket sätt?

2) What would you say the assessment center tested?

2) Vad skulle du säga att assessment centret testade?

b) På vilket sätt då?

3) What would you suggest be added to the assessment center?

3) Med den erfarenhet du har nu, vad skulle du föreslå att man lade till assessment- centret?

b) Varför ?

4) What would you suggest be subtracted from the assessment center?
For all interviewees also rephrased:
If you had to subtract anything, what would you suggest that should be?

4) ...och vad skulle du föreslå att man tog bort från assessmentcentret?

tillägg. Om man var tvungen att ta bort något, vad skulle det bli?

b) Varför?

5) Did you like the assessment center?

5) Vad *tyckte* du om assessmentcentret?

6) How was the assessment center in comparison to other methods of selection?

6) Vad tycker du om assessmentcentret i jämförelse med andra urvalsmetoder?

Appendix 2: Lists of criteria/dimensions/ + outline of VGR procedures

The order of the criteria / dimensions / is changed to match as close as possible. This does not mean that the first criterion in every row has been replaced by the second. Italics indicate my translations.

The third column lists the 10 most frequently used dimensions in large Flemish organizations (Lievens & Goemaere 1999, p. 216). Their order is changed to fit the two other lists as close as reasonable, numbers in parenthesis (#) indicate original ranking. Thus, only the list of VGR's current (2002) criteria is arranged in falling order of desirability.

Lists of criteria

First list of criteria Used 1996-1999 in Älvsborg	Second list of criteria, 1999-now in VGR	Typical dimension from Flanders (Lievens & Goemaere. 1999)
Engagerad i ledarrollen *Focused on the management role*	Vilja att leda *The will to lead*	Leadership (1)
Informativ / kommunikativ *Informative / Communicative*	Tydlig *Succinct / Clear*	Communicative skills (2)
Helhetssyn *Comprehensive overview*	Helhetssyn *Comprehensive overview*	Planning and organisation (3)
Flexibel *Flexible*	Relationsbyggare *Builder of relations*	Social skills (5) Creativity (8)
Stödjande *Supportive*	Teaminnktad *Team orientation*	Team orientation (4)
Handlingskraftig *Resourceful*	Strukturerad *Structured*	
	Analytisk förmåga *Analytic ability*	Problem analysis (6)
Förmåga att entusiasmera och motivera *Ability to create enthusiasm* *and motivation*	Förtroendeingivande *Reliable*	
Mål och resultatinriktad *Focused on the goal* *and the results*	Beslutsam *Decisive*	Initiative (7)
		Tolerance for stress (9) Customer orientation (10)

Outline of VGR procedure with comparison

De olika övningarna som används av Västra Götalandsregionens AC är:
1. En övning i att inreda en fabrikslokal
2. En övning i att på kort tid fatta beslut om en medarbetare, "det svåra samtalet"
3. En analys, en presentationsövning, där kandidaten spelar rollen av konsult
4. En strukturerad intervju av kandidaten
5. Ett numeriskt test
6. Ett verbalt test
7. Ett personlighetsformulär plus en djupintervju
8. En självskattning
(personal communication with Stig Larsson, spring 2002)

Translation
The exercises used in VGR's AC are:
1. An exercise in allocating space in a warehouse
2. "The Difficult Employee"
3. A case analysis and presentation exercise, the candidate plays the role of a consultant
4. A structured interview of the candidate
5. A numerical test
6. A verbal test
7. A personality inventory plus a deep interview
8. A self evaluation questionnaire

For comparison: the top 5 ranking exercises from Lievens and Goemaere (1999, p. 216)
1. In-basket exercises
2. Leaderless group discussions
3. Role plays "with irate customer or with problem subordinate" (ibid., p. 216)
4. Presentations
5. Case analyses

Appendix 3: Translation of the quotes from Swedish into English
(Quotes follow the same order as in the paper.)

Answers to the initial questions

What in the assessment center did you find the most relevant for your current in position?
1) Vad i assessmentcentret tycker du var mest relevant for del du gör nu?

"Ska man ha assessment över huvud taget om man inte kan uppnå så nära verkligheten som möjligt om man nu bedömer personer."

> "*Should you use assessment at all if you can 't get as close to real life as possible, if you have to judge persons?*"

"Det som jag har användning för då är det svåra samtalet och grupparbetet. För jag arbetar mycket med konflikthantering just nu."

> "*I've had a lot of use for 'the difficult employee' and the group exercise, since I handle a lot of conflict management right now.*"

"Det är ju aldrig så med konflikthantering att det går att lägga karbonpapper emellan, men den [övningen] var realistisk. Man kunde känna igen vissa delar i det och det gjorde ju att... det var liksom taget från verkligheten."

> "*It's never that way with handling conflicts that you can copy one onto the other... But it was realistic... You could spot certain features and that made... It was taken from reality so to speak.*"

"Man hade någon som inte riktigt platsade på den arbetsplatsen längre, så kom det synpunkter från medarbetarna och dennes chef, så skulle man ta ställning, tänker man väldigt snabbt så kanske man identifierar sig med någon av utav rollerna."

> "*You had somebody' who really didn't fit in here any more, opinions were heard from co-workers and that person's immediate supervisor. You were supposed to take a stand but if you thought really fast you might identify with one of the roles.*"

"Allt det andra det andra som jag genomgick i assessment center var egentligen för att dom andra skulle få en bild utav mig och se om jag levde upp och stämde med den bilden som företaget har sagt att man vill ha som profil på sina chefer."

> "*All that other stuff' I went through at the assessment center really was for the others to get a picture of me, to check if I lived up to... Fit the image the organization had stated as the desired profile for their kind of management.*"

1

"Assessment speglar ända den tiden vi lever i. Folk vill ju ha snabba chefer eller något sådant va. Dom har ju anpassat sina redskap till det som samtiden kräver. Det är ju tidens melodi testa osv. Det är inte det här tidigare, att den som är äldst eller den som varit längst på företaget får jobbet."

> "*Assessment is a mirror of our times. People want rapid management or something, like that. They have adapted their tools to the demands of today. It's in the air, all this testing, etc. It's not the old style, he who is the oldest, or been with the firm the longest, gets the job.*"

"Lite av det jag själv kände fick jag ett kvitto på. Som t ex. vill du verkligen bli chef?"

> "*I got confirmation of some of what I already felt myself. For example: do you really want to be a manager?*"

"Grejen, upplevde jag, var ju den att man kunde se det ur flera olika perspektiv och så småningom ur chefsperspektiv, hur jag som chef skulle göra. Det som var bra med denna övningen, jag är egentligen ganska impulsiv, men när man förstod varför man skulle göra den har övningen så gick åtminstone jag igenom lite olika faser, olika roller, och till slut kom fram till chefsrollen."

> "*The crux, as I saw it, was that you could picture this from many different angles and eventually from the position of management. How would you proceed as the manager? That was what was good about this exercise. I'm really quite impulsive, but when you realized why you were supposed to do this exercise, I at least went through a series of phases, different roles... arriving at the role of the manager.*"

What would you say the assessment center tested?
2) Vad skulle du säga att assessment centret testade?

"Det mäter ju väldigt många personliga egenskaper, om man överhuvudtaget passar att vara chef."

> "*It measures many personal qualities, if you are at all cut out to be a manager.*"

"Självskattning kommer fram, hur man agerar, hur man bemöter. Skillnad mellan självskattning och beteende. Parametrar: helhetsperspektiv, analytisk förmaga, intresse för ledarskap."

> "*Self-evaluation is revealed, how you act, how you interact. The difference between self-evaluation and actual behavior. Parameters: comprehensive overview, analytic ability, interest in management.*"

"Det handlar väl om den sociala och kommunikativa förmågan, att prata med andra, förmågan att förmedla, förmågan att ta in information. Det var väl det viktigaste kanske som dom mätte."

> "*It was about social and communicative ability, talking to others, the ability to convey information, the ability to absorb information. That's perhaps the most important of what was tested.*"

"Jag tycker att det speglar för mycket snabbhet."

> "*I think it focuses too much on speed.*"

"När klockan hade gått och slagit då var det stopp. Och så var det oavsett om jag hade förstått eller inte. Det var dom inte intresserade av."

> "*When the time was up, that was the end of it. That's the way it was. Regardless if I had understood anything or not. They weren 't interested in that.*"

"Jag blev förtvivlad för jag hann inte med allting... men det är som högskoleprovet, väldigt få ska klara av allt. Det mätte det där väldigt bra. Har gäller det att sansa sig."

> "*I grew desperate since I didn't find time to complete everything... but it's like the Scholastic Aptitude Test, very few complete all the exercises. That was tested very well, the point was to stay collected.*"

"den där matteleken."

> "*That math play*"

"Jag upplevde det egentligen inte som ett... höll jag på att säga. Urvalskriterium, för det vi då diskuterade, i så fall borde man ha känt sig förolämpad."

> "*I really didn 't perceive it as a... Criterium for selection, for what we were discussing at the time. If that had been the case, you should have felt insulted.*"

What would you suggest be added to the assessment center?
3) Med den erfarenhet du har nu, vad skulle du föreslå att man lade till assessmentcentret?

"Det är alltid svårt, för att i en ren anställningsintervju så plockar du upp psykopater, mer än du plockar upp övriga, därför att dom är så charmiga. Dom skapar en kontakt genast, man blir fäst vid dom med en gång. Men tycker man att har man en hel dag på sig kan man ha några moment som gör att man kommer bakom ytan litegrann. Då tycker jag man borde kunna fokusera lite mer på personer på bekostnad av kanske att fokusera på färdigheter. För det är valdigt mycket färdigheter. Även det sociala är färdighetsorienterat. Det är för all del nånting man kan lära sig. Vad som är ett socialt accepterat beteende. Hur du ska bete dig i en intervjusituation och allting."

> "*It is always difficult, because in a pure job interview you do pick up psychopaths more than you pick up the rest - simply because they 're so charming. They create an immediate contact, you grow fond of them instantly. But I think that if you have a whole day at your disposal you could have a few exercises that go under the surface a hit more. I think you could focus more on personality, maybe at the expense of the focus on skills. Because it [the assessment center] is very focused on skills. Even*

social skills are skills, it is something that could he learnt: what is socially acceptable behavior, how you behave in an interview situation, and everything."

"Sen tror jag säkert att en sociopat eller en psykopat kanske skulle klara sig bra på assessment också. Jag vet inte. Jag tror man kan Ijuga sig igenom vissa saker och komma undan med det."

"Furthermore, surely a sociopath or a psychopath could do well on an assessment as well. I don 't know. I personally believe you could lie your way through some exercises and get away with it."

"Personlighetstester är ofta väldigt missvisande. Jag tror att assessment ger en betydligt bättre bild än det här att du skickar en till en konsultande psykolog som ger dig tre tester. Och sen så ger en utvärdering vad det är för person."

"Personality tests are often very inaccurate. I think assessment draws a significantly better picture than sending someone to a consulting psychologist who does three tests and gives an evaluation of what sort of person it was."

"Dom hade ett litet personlighetstest också. Och den verkade lite för ytlig... Och det brukar ofta vara så att det finns ett gediget personlighetstest inom psykiatrin som kräver utbildad personal och som ger många tolkningsmöjligheter, och så tar nån konsultfirma testet och gör om det, förenklar det. Skickar iväg ekonomer på en tvåveckorskurs och så blir dom bedömare sen. Mycket mindre frihetsgrader, utan det blir lite 'Hänt-i-veckan-test' över det. Har du mer än fem poäng är du en god ledare och mindre så är du inte så god, får du två så ska du se dig om efter ett annat yrke... I och för sig. Jag tycker nog att diskussionen blev ganska bra med det testet sen, efteråt, men just när jag gjorde det tyckte jag det kändes väldigt förenklat."

"They had a small personality test as well and it appeared a hit too superficial.... There is usually a thorough personality test in the field of psychiatry, something which has to he administered by trained personnel and wich yields many interpretations. And then a consulting firm takes this test, redesigns it, simplifies it. They send accountants on a two week course after which they 're assessors. Much fewer degrees of freedom, it become more of a Readers Digest test instead. More than five points equals good manager, less equals not so good, and if you only get two points: consider another profession... But in a way, I do think the discussion around that test was pretty good later, afterwards. But at the time I was doing it I thought it felt really simplified."

"Vad jag kan se är en ganska stor chefsgrupp och man har ju olika inställning till vad man har för benämning på sin personal. Jag tycker att jag har lärt mig att se personalen som mina medarbetare, jag säger inte att så och så många 'huvuden' har jag. Exempelvis."

"From what I can see, it is a pretty large group of managers and they all have different attitudes, labeling their staff differently. I have learned to regard my staff as my co-workers, I don't refer to them as how many 'heads ' I command."

4

"Att få den teamkänslan, på något vis, det tycker jag att man inte riktigt fick fram i assessment. Det borde man lägga till."

> "*How to obtain that team spirit, somehow, that's something I don't think they got out in the assessment center. They ought to add that.*"

"Jag vet inte hur man kan plocka upp det i assessment riktigt, dom här olika delarna som dominerar personligheten är viktigt. Att man kan lära sig att tygla dom som kan såra folk. Om jag blir förbannad kan jag säga saker som jag inte hade gjort om jag hade sovit på det. Man blir ända arg men inte behöver säga... ta i det just då, men ibland, visst."

> "*I don't know how you could pick that up in an assessment center really, the different parts that dominate your personality, that's important. To he able to control those that could hurt people. If 1 get mad I can say things I wouldn't if I had slept on it. You do get mad but you don't have to say... To deal with it just then...*"

"En annan sak det är ju att hantera en för stor arbetsmängd, jag måste skära bort saker som är det det minst väsentliga. Nån uppgift som handlar om att sovra bort det som inte behöver göras och koncentrera sig på det som är riktigt viktigt. Det tror jag, just för mitt jobb så hade det varit oerhört värdefullt att ha det som urvalskriterium. Nån uppgift som sorterar bort dom som fastnar i det första dom får. Som känner att dom måste springa på alla puckarna. Eller förmågan faktiskt att göra saker och ting halvbra, eller nästan färdigt om det behövs for att jobba klart sitt beting. Det är väl inte sånt som ingår i den svenska tjänstemannakulturen men det är helt nödvandigt i mitt arbete. Kunna släppa saker och ting i halvfärdigt skick. Det vet jag att det är många som har svårt för."

> "*Another thing would be that to handle too great a workload, I have to leave out stuff that's the least crucial. An exercise to deal with sorting out what doesn 't have to be done and concentrating on the most important. That, I think, for my position would have been an incredibly relevant sorting criterium. An assignment that sorts out those who tend to get stuck with the first task they get. Those who feel they have to play every hall. Or the ability to leave stuff half-well-done - or almost-done - if necessary, to finish their daily quota. This really is not a part of Swedish white-collar culture, but it is absolutely crucial for my position. To he able to let go of tasks when they're not quite done. That's something I know is a problem for lots of people.*"

"Skulle jag se det som mer relevans till jobbet idag skulle jag nog jobbat lite mer med inkorgsövningar eller såna övningar"

> "*To get more relevance for my tasks at work, I would have put in more in-basket exercises or something like that.*"

"Det finns ju ingen gång som man ska göra det på så fruktansvärt, läsa in det, det har har du att göra och det ska du komma med ett förslag till. Jag gör aldrig så i verkligheten."

> "*It never happens that you have to do it in such a terrible... to read it all; You have to do this, and you have to produce a suggestion to this. I never do that in real life.*"

5

"Hur ska vi kunna få tid att vara långsiktiga när vi har kortsiktiga problem att lösa. Det är ett definitivt problem. Och det gäller att försöka få folk att kanske att vara medvetna om skillnaden mellan långsiktighet och kortsiktighet. Det tror jag man måste jobba med för man är så uppfylld av saker som man vill lösa rakt upp och ner och gå vidare med morgondagens problem att man hinner inte, tid för reflektion är dåligt. Man tar sig inte, och för cheferna så tror jag att det är jätteviktigt att man gör det."

> "*How could we get time to see things in the long term when we have short-term problems to solve. This is definitely a problem, and you have to make people aware of the difference between long-term and short-term views. I think you have to work on this, because you 're so busy with tasks that you want to solve right away, to get on with the problems of tomorrow, that there is no time. The time for reflection is lacking. You don't take that time, and for management, I think it's really important that you do.*"

"Dom var väldigt frustrerade, allt dom tog i genererade tjugofem andra trådar."

Om fem labbass som fick i uppdrag att skriva kvalitetsmanualen. Dom var vana vid jobb som tog slut på en dag och när dom satt på ett beting som tog ett år blev det svårt. "Vad hade dom lyckats göra varje dag? Det tog tre månader att byta perspektiv, minst." Rendered in abbreviated form.

What would you suggest be subtracted from the assessment center?
4) ...och vad skulle du föreslå att man tog bort från assessmentcentret?

"Jag tror man kanske kan ta bort mattegrejen, svenska, det finns ju betyg och sånt. Men det var ju inte ren svenska. Det var mer ju läsa information och förstå. Det är en viktig grej."

> "*I think maybe you could dispose of the math thing, the reading/writing, there are grades and stuff. But then again, it wasn't just a language test. It dealt with reading and understanding information. And that is important stuff.*"

"Det går inte att bortse även från den allmäna färdighetsmässiga, läs och skriv om man inte kan få fram det på annat vis. Men den borde man kunna se på skolbetyg eller referenser eller något."

> "*You cannot disregard the skill factor - reading and writing - not if you can't assess that in some other way. But you should he able to assess it through grades or references or something.*"

"Vad skulle man kunna ta bort? Presentationsövningen skulle kunna tas bort. En inkorgsövning skulle ge mer. Inkorg är bättre för i presentationsövningen kan man välja mellan två vägar, i inkorg kan man lägga till betydligt fler."

> "*What could you remove? The presentation exercise could he removed. An in-basket exercise would yield more. An in-basket is better 'cause in the presentation exercise you can only choose between two options, whereas in-baskets contain many more options.*"

"Jag tycker man ska ta bort - om möjligt - stressfaktorn, för jag tycker att det speglar fel egenskaper."

> *"I suggest you remove - if possible - the stress factor. Because I think that puts emphasis on all the wrong qualities."*

"Grupparbeten är en sårbar punkt, gruppen jag hamnade i när vi skulle diskutera vem vi skulle anställa var jobbig. Hade jag fått bestämma hade jag helt enkelt inte velat ha med vissa i min grupp. Jag menar till slut hävdade dom att kandidaten vi skulle diskutera var att föredra för att han kom från 'en bra familj'."

> *"Group exercises are an Achilles' heel, the group I ended up in, when we should discuss whom we should employ, was difficult. Had I been in charge, I would simply not have wanted certain persons in my group. I mean, by the end of the discussion they claimed that their candidate was preferrahle since he was of 'good family'."*

"Dessutom var det ett urval, där alla söker en chefsbefattning som är där. Du har inga naturliga roller. Alla vill stå vid rodret och ingen vill ro."

> *"Furthermore, it was a selection where everyone present applied for a managerial position. You don't get any natural roles. Everybody wants to stand at the helm but nobody wants to row the boat."*

"Gruppövningen är inte nödvändigt vis sanningen. Ämnet kan göra att man drar sig tillbaka. Är ofta avvaktande först i gruppövningar. Det är inte säkert att icke-lämpligt beteende lyfts fram och det missgynnar eventuella blyga kandidater."

> *"The group exercise is not necessarily the truth. The topic could make you withdraw. – I am often hesitant at first in group exercises. - And I'm not so sure that inappropriate behavior is exposed, and group exercises do discriminate against possible shy candidates."*

"Eftersom det är en simulerad verklighet så måste ju då.. teaterapor måste ju gynnas och blyga personer måste misgynnas."

> *"Since it is a simulated reality... wannabe actors will be favored and shy persons will he disfavored."*

"Visst, en och annan skulle kanske lättvindigt promenera igenom, men har du svårigheter på den sociala sidan då får du också svårigheter som chef. För kan du inte hantera dom här situationerna... det här handlar ju inte om du är blyg och tillbakadragen och ska fungera i en chefsposition. Kan man inte hantera den situationen då klarar man inte av att vara chef. Så på det sättet så får inte dom det svårare, utan då är det nog faktiskt så att dom hanterar inte kraven egentligen, om dom ramlar ur pga dom skälen."

> *"Sure, a few could probably walk right through it, but if you have difficulties with social skills, you will have trouble as a manager as well. 'Cause if you can 't handle these situations... This is not about being shy or withdrawn and having to function as a manager. If you can't handle this situation, you can't handle being the manager. It is not more difficult for them, they really don't live up to the demands, if they drop out for that reason."*

"Jag måste tycka att den personen är en väldigt proffsig individ i det dom gör. Och känner inte jag det så släpper jag inte till det som dom är ute efter. Då blottar inte jag mina sidor eller visar inte exakt vad det är... då gör jag inte nånting till hundra procent."

> *"I'll have to regard that person as a very professional individual in what he's doing. And if I don't feel that way I will not reveal what he's after. In that case I wont show my weak spots or exactly what it is... In that case I don 't give a hundred percent."*

Did you like the assessment center? and
How was the assessment center in comparison to other methods of selection?
5) Vad tyckte du om assessmentcentret? och
6) Vad tycker du om assessmentcentret i jämförelse med andra urvalsmetoder?

"Ett väl utvecklat assessment det tror jag är mycket bra. Jag skulle ju tycka att alla som får chefstjänster ska genomgå assessment"

> *"I think a well developed assessment center is very good. I would like everyone who is appointed manager to do an assessment center."*

"Jag tyckte det var roligt och spännande. Jag var liksom inte nervös inför det."

> *"I found it fun and exciting. I was not like nervous beforehand."*

"Så jag tycker att i viss man så speglar det fel saker, men däremot så tycker jag att det var spännande områden det testar."

> *"So, to a certain extent I think it focuses on the wrong items, but on the other hand, I thought they were testing exciting fields."*

"Eftersom jag inte kan presentera nånting annat så kan jag känna att det kanske är taskig kritik att säga att det var för låg nivå utan att själv säga men det här och det här borde ha varit såhär."

> *"Since I can't present something else, I can feel that it might he had form to say that the level was too low, without myself stating that you should include this, and it should have been like this."*

"Jag tror att det är ett grovt instrument för att hitta dom direkt olämpliga. Men har man två eller tre personer som kan vara bra så är det jättesvårt vid asssessment att hitta dom delarna."

"I think it is a too blunt an instrument, suited to sort out the really inappropriate candidates. However, if you have two or three persons that could be good, it will be really hard to find those qualities in an assessment."

"Men man får ju ta det för vad det ar. Det är ju liksom det som är kontentan på något sätt. Man ska inte upphöja det till skyarna som ett fantastiskt instrument. Men det är battre än inget. Man får en litegrann information till den som ska anställa nån, det tror jag."

"But you must take it for what it is, that's the bottom line. You shouldn't really praise it as a wonderful instrument. But it is better than nothing. It 'II still convey a tiny piece of information to the person who's about to employ someone, I think."

"Samlar information på ett helt annat sätt, på ett bredare sätt upplever jag."

"[It] Collects information in an entirely different fashion, in a broader way. As I perceive it."

"Det var flera aspiranter - och flera bedömare också. Och på vissa test var det flera aspiranter i samma test som interagerade med varandra s a s. Och ibland var det olika bedömare som kollad olika saker under samma test, samtidigt som pratade med varandra. Och så mixade dom så varje aspirant fick olika bedömare på olika test. Det fanns olika personer som kunde ha en synpunkt på olika kvalitéer som man ville bedöma. Det tycker jag verkar seriöst."

"There were many candidates — and many assessors too. And on some exercises there were many candidates who interacted with each other. And sometimes there were different assessors who checked up on different things during the same exercise, at the same time, who talked to each other. And they mixed it so that each candidate got a different assessor on the different exercises. There were different persons who could express an opinion on different qualities they wanted to assess. That, I think seems professional."

"Sen är det ju också det, det som är fördelen med det är ju att det är sex olika personer som träffar individen i olika situationer."

"It is also that... The advantage of this is that you have six different persons who meet the individual in different situations."

"Så dom hade ju, samma variabel var ju bedömd ur två tre övningar. I hela batteriet, det tycker jag dom gjorde bra."

"So they had the same variable assessed in two or three exercises. In the whole test, that's something I think they did well."

Emerging topics

Ideas related to the assessment center

"Jag tror att om man känner till i detalj innan kan det fördärva en del av resultatet."

> *"I think that if you know the details beforehand, that could ruin some of the results."*

"Som urvalsinstrument, eller bedömningsintstrument, är det nog det snällaste jag gått igenom."

> *"As a selective, or evaluative, device it is probably the kindest one I've passed."*

"Att se mognaden i sig själv. Jag trodde att jag var väldigt bra på det och det, men egentligen var det nånting annat som jag var bra på. Så det är en utveckling."

> *"To recognize your level of maturity. I thought I was really good at this and that, but in reality I was good at other stuff. It is a maturing experience."*

"Om man inte ska plocka fram chefer, om inte det är huvudmålet. Så tror jag framförallt jag att man kan använda det för att belysa personliga relationer till andra inom en organisation. Och hur man behandlar sin nästa om man säger så."

> *"If you're not out to pick future management, if that's not the prime objective... I think that most of all you could use it to cast a light on personal relations to others within an organization. How you treat your neighbor, so to speak."*

"En sak jag har funderat över sen den där tiden, man har aldrig velat följa upp den där någång. Det var ett väl skott i morkret som man gjorde."

> *"One thing I've been thinking about since that time... they have never wanted a follow-up anytime. It's like it was a shot in the dark they made."*

"Jag tror att varje individ har ett olika starkt behov av att höra att det har jag gjorde jag var bra, jag har varit en duktig [person] en del av oss klarar oss rätt så langt utan att någon säger det."

> *"I think each person has a different need to hear that the thing you did was good, that you've been a good person. Some of us manage pretty well without anyone saying that."*

Impressions from the workplace

"Och som chef är man ju betydligt mer utsatt. Jag menar som anställd kan man ju sköta sitt arbete och sen gå hem. Men som chef så är man ju liksom satt på en liten upphöjd kulle nånstans och alla kan ju. Man blottas ju väldigt tydligt va. Så har man inte bra självkännedom så tror jag man råkar väldigt illa ut... Och känner man liksom inte till sina egna drivkrafter och vad det är man är ute efter

nånstans så tror jag nog att det är väldigt svårt att leda andra. Om man inte har ganska bra koll på sig själv. Och det tror jag inte så många har över huvud taget. Och det gäller ju även chefen."

> *"As the manager you are more exposed. I mean: as an employee you can do your part and go home. But as the manager you are put on a small elevated hill somewhere for everybody to... You are very clearly exposed. So if you don't have good self-knowledge you can get really hurt... And if you don't know what's driving you and what you're really after I think you will have great trouble leading others. If you don't know yourself pretty well. And I think very few do. And that goes for the manager as well."*

"Jag är ju lojal mot min personal, samtidigt som jag är arbetsgivarens förlängda arm ut i verksamheten. Och sen kommer det påbud, nu ska ni genomföra det här. Som du kanske inte ens har varit delaktig i att påverka. Och egentligen kanske du inte tycker det är bra, men du har ändå en skyldighet att det ska genomföras. Och det blir ju dubbla lojaliteter."

> *"I am loyal to my staff, but at the same time I am the top management's long arm reaching into the enterprise. Then comes a decree: carry out this. Something you might not even be involved in. And might not really care for that much. But you still have the obligation to carry it through. And that means dual loyalties."*

"Att skulle jag sätta mig att börja gråta for att två bråkar med varandra så är det ingen som kan känna tillit eller tilltro eller trygghet till mig. Nu har det aldrig fallit mig in. Men den styrkan måste man ha."

> *"If I sat down and cried because two people argue, then nobody would feel any trust or confidence in me. Not that it's happened. But that's the sort of strength you must have."*

"Det värsta för mig själv tycker jag är att mina arbetsuppgifter många gånger ligger långt långt ifrån det som assessment tog upp, det som aspirantutbildningen. Det läggs bara mer och mer administration på. Tillslut blir man en sån där administrationsnisse. Som sitter i något rum och som inte ser vad som händer och som inte har tid att kolla: 'Hur mår din personal?' 'Hur verkar det ute på avdelningen.' Och det vill inte jag... Jag blir en ganska dyr löneassistent."

> *"The worst for me personally, is that my tasks often lie far, far away from what was addressed by the assessment center, or the initial training. They add more and more administration. Finally I'll end up an administration clerk. Someone who sits in some room and doesn't see what's going on, and doesn't have any time to check. 'How 's my staff doing? '. 'How are things in the department? ' And I don't want that... I'll turn into a pretty expensive payroll assistant."*

"Det finns personer med hög kompetens som når sina egna funktionsmål men man når inte helheten."

Hard to quote, rendered in abbreviated form:

Some interviewees complained that a few highly qualified persons in their department reached their own goals but that the department as a whole failed in reaching the common goal.

"Makt är ett ord som jag sällan tänker på, samtidigt så ska man inte vara ovetande som chef om att man har det. Innan jag blev chef kunde jag säga nånting och dagen efter jag blev chef kunde jag säga samma sak och det fick helt annat genomslag och det tror jag är viktigt att man vet."

> *"Power is a word I rarely think about. But at the same time you shouldn't be unaware*
> *that you have it as the manager. Before I became the manager I could say something,*
> *and the day after I was made manager, the same thing carried a totally different weight,*
> *and that, I think, is really important to be aware of."*