

The A&DC Thought Leadership Series

Who's Assessing Who?

The Role of Applicant Perceptions in the Selection Process



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The primary focus of selection process design is the identification of individuals who will perform effectively in the job role (ie validity). Whilst this is clearly critical from the organisation's perspective, exclusively focusing on what the organisation is looking for may result in a failure to address the aspects of the process which influence candidates' perceptions of your organisation.

Candidates are not simply passive recipients of a selection process. However well the process may have been designed, however courteously the Candidate may have been treated, and however much the employer might think they are the one with the power in the selection situation, Candidates are making complex judgements about their fit with the job role and your organisation. These judgements may have significant attitudinal and behavioural outcomes such as intent to pursue the role, offer acceptance or, should they be selected, their future engagement with your organisation.

But what aspects of the selection process really matter to Candidates? How do they differ from the considerations of the employer or from common courtesy? On what aspects of the process will Candidates be making their judgements and how can you make sure that no matter what the outcome, their perceptions of your organisation are positive? This paper will discuss these questions and provide some clear recommendations in terms of practical steps that can be taken to address these issues.

What Do We Know About Applicant Perceptions?

Whilst applicant perceptions have historically been a relatively under researched topic, there has recently been a notable increase in research dedicated to this issue. This increased attention has been in part attributed to the greater competition between employers for top talent. In addition, the demands of 'Generation Y' as they enter the workforce may have an influence on the acceptability of 'traditional' selection practice, in terms of the overt power imbalance that is implied.

Applicant perceptions have been discussed from a number of perspectives. Broadly speaking, the literature falls into three main areas:

- 1) Employer branding.
- 2) Perceptions of 'fit'.
- 3) Fairness and justice perceptions.

All three have a slightly different focus in terms of what they tell us is important about applicant perceptions and are described in the following sections.

Employer Branding and The Selection Process

A recent publication by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) defines employer branding as “how an organisation markets what it has to offer both potential and existing employees” (Walker and Platt-Higgins, 2008). A scan of the websites of suppliers specialising in employee branding reveals that when it comes to recruitment and selection, branding efforts are typically focused upon the so-called ‘attraction’ phase (ie pre-application) and include websites, recruiting literature, etc. So, a potential employee applies, they’re convinced by what they’ve seen so far, but what happens next?

A simple way in which branding can continue throughout the selection process is through the inclusion of logos and ‘house style’ on invitation emails/letters, application forms, on-line psychometric tests, and Assessment Centre materials. The style of communication should also be considered in terms of how Candidates are informed of the next stage of the process, be it formal or informal, through letter, email, text message, telephone call etc. Another simple (and somewhat overt) method of communicating your brand is through organisational briefings, which can be built into an Assessment Centre timetable as a non-assessed element.

A more subtle way of communicating your brand is via the competencies that are being assessed in the process. This provides a means by which your organisation can communicate the behaviours it values. By making these explicit to the Candidate, you are giving them an opportunity to understand what behaviours are rewarded within the organisation, and also make a judgement about how this fits with their own skills and talents (a key component of Person-Job fit, discussed in the next section).

It is also important to consider how your brand can be reinforced by the individuals an applicant encounters throughout a selection process. Indeed, there is evidence which suggests that interactive methods of communicating the employer brand have a greater impact than direct communications such as advertising (Andersen, 2007). The amount of interaction is likely to increase as a Candidate proceeds through the selection process. Whilst this can be advantageous in terms of brand communication, the nature of these interactions means there is greater potential for variability in how Candidates experience your brand. Individuals with which applicants communicate should therefore be selected carefully in order that they both demonstrate and communicate your brand in a consistent manner. This poses a particular challenge when external consultants may be conducting assessments, and highlights the importance of briefing all Assessors as to the brand messages that they should be communicating.

Although the content of the actual assessments used will be largely dictated the competencies and nature of the job role, these shouldn’t be your only consideration. Other elements of your brand could be communicated in the exercises, particularly when the exercises are bespoke to your organisation. For example, whilst simulation exercises may be set in a fictional organisation, this can be defined to share key characteristics with your own, such as placing an emphasis on environmental policies or the importance of team working. A similar consideration is the medium of exercise delivery. Whilst this has a part to play in the perceived job relevance and fairness of the exercise, it can also send a strong message about the type of organisation and job role for which an individual is applying. For example, a Candidate applying to join an apparently innovative IT organisation may alter their perceptions if they are asked to complete a ‘standard’ paper-based exercise.

Perceptions of 'Fit'

The concept of 'fit' relates to the degree of congruence or match between an individual and an organisation or job role. It emphasises the negative outcomes that may result from a mismatch between these areas in terms of engagement and retention. In practical terms, this perspective highlights the importance of acknowledging the two way nature of selection: the organisation is aiming to identify an individual with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to do the job, and the individual is looking to determine whether or not the organisation and role will be suitable in terms of their strengths and aspirations.

Many of the issues to do with branding are also supported by this perspective. However, from an applicant perceptions point of view, the key emphasis in this case is that the process should allow the Candidate to find out as much as possible about the organisation and job role. It is therefore critical to ensure that the message the Candidate receives about the organisation is honest throughout the process. This doesn't necessarily mean presenting a 'warts and all' view of your organisation (as you can be pretty sure your competitors won't be doing the same), but conversely it should not involve misleading Candidates about what they can expect from the role just to get them to join the organisation. For example, inviting Candidates to an Assessment Centre in a glamorous hotel when the job is located in a power station, or promising them career development opportunities that are only available to 1% of all employees, might 'wow' them enough to get them through the door, but will also almost certainly lead to some very disgruntled line managers who are having to manage an employee whose expectations haven't been met.

The use of Realistic Job Previews at the 'pre selection' stage can be an effective way to allow the Candidate to identify their own suitability for a role. The positioning of these methods at this point in the process means that these 'self selection' activities precede more resource intensive direct selection methods. To achieve this end, many organisations use self-report questionnaires which give Candidates insight into how their strengths or preferences fit (or don't fit) with what the organisation has to offer. However, this type of information can continue to be communicated throughout the selection process.

The Assessment Centre exercises themselves can be used to represent the types of activities an individual may encounter in the role. 'Day in the life' Assessment Centres can be particularly effective in this respect, as they can be designed to give Candidates a flavour of a role, as well as allowing the organisation to establish whether the Candidate meets the necessary criteria. Situational Judgement Tests can serve a similar purpose by providing examples of the types of situations job incumbents may encounter in the role and asking them to identify the suitability of a number of different actions. Increasing the level of interaction between the Candidate and the organisation is also an effective way of communicating information about the job. This might include giving Candidates access to actual job incumbents, and allowing them to ask questions of them without having any concerns that the information will subsequently be used as part of the selection decision. Alternatively, site or office tours may also be beneficial.

For a Candidate to judge their suitability for a role, they not only need to have information about the role, but also an understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses and motivations. To address this aspect of fit, the selection process can be used to increase a Candidate's self-awareness. It could include, for example, 'live' feedback on psychometric tools, such as personality measures, during which time the role could also be discussed or positioned in relation to an individual's own preferences. Such tools might not necessarily feed into the final selection decision, but may allow a Candidate to better understand how they might fit in with the organisation and role.

Fairness and Justice Perceptions

In terms of academic research on applicant perceptions, perceptions of fairness have received the most research attention (eg Gilliland, 1993). Two aspects of fairness have been identified as critical: procedural justice and distributive justice. Procedural justice relates to the extent to which the procedure itself is seen to be fair, and distributive justice to the extent to which the decisions made on the basis of a test or process are seen to be fair. Procedural justice has received particular attention and lends itself most readily to practical steps that can be incorporated into the selection process.

There are a number of aspects of procedural justice, which include:

- The perceived job relevance of the tests used.
- Whether the Candidate feels they are being given the opportunity to perform to their best.
- The consistency of administration.
- The treatment by administrators.
- The provision of feedback.

Candidate perceptions of the job relevance of a given selection method have been identified as critical to perceived fairness. Therefore the selection of exercises which are closely related to the job, such as simulation exercises, work samples or Situational Judgement Tests, can help ensure this. This suggests that where assessment methods are used that are less job related (such as off-the-shelf psychometric tests), additional effort may need to be expended in justifying the inclusion of such tests. This may be particularly challenging when a Candidate is completing a psychometric test as a sift, and does not get the opportunity to ask in detail what function the test serves. This emphasises the importance of providing information about why each of the selection methods is being used, both prior to and during the process.

Another aspect of procedural justice is the extent to which the Candidate perceives that they have the opportunity to fully represent their knowledge, skills and abilities. This presents a particular challenge in relation to 'staged' selection processes, such as those with a sift, where one test (such as verbal or numerical reasoning) is used to select out applicants, despite the fact that the job requires a range of skills. This suggests that applicants should be given the opportunity to represent themselves as fully as possible at the early stages of the process, eg through the completion of a competency based application form.

A good Assessor will understand the importance of consistent exercise administration from the point of view of reliability and validity. However, there is evidence to show that procedural consistency also has a significant influence on applicant perceptions of fairness. This highlights the importance of the need to put in place standardised administration procedures, as well as training to ensure that Assessor and administrators understand the importance of fairness and consistency in administration.

The provision of feedback has also been identified as a key factor that can influence fairness perceptions, in terms of both procedural and distributive justice. Feedback should always be given, and the reasons why an individual was selected/rejected should be clearly communicated. It should also be conducted as soon as possible after the decision has been made.

The Role of Common Courtesy

Fundamentally, a key component of applicant perceptions is likely to be the extent to which they feel that they have been treated courteously throughout the process. This includes interactions with all HR personnel who are involved, as well as the requirement for prompt communication and sticking to any published deadlines.

Interaction With Validity

For the most part the actions recommended by the three perspectives detailed here support (rather than undermine) the effectiveness of selection processes in identifying the most effective candidates for the role. However, if applicant perceptions are given priority over validity in selection process design, there is a possibility that the overall effectiveness of the process could be compromised. For example, the selection of exclusively 'job related' exercises could lead to the conclusion that cognitive ability tests should not be used in a selection process - despite the fact that they are the single most effective predictor of future job performance. Consequently, applicant perceptions should certainly be an important consideration, but should also not take precedence over validity in terms of the extent to which they drive selection process design.

Summary

Below is a summary of the key actions that can be taken to optimise the chances that applicant perceptions of your organisation will be positive at each stage of the process:

Throughout the process:

- Reflect your employer brand in the style and nature of communication.
- Contact applicants promptly and adhere to any explicit deadlines.
- Provide Candidates with information about the competencies to be assessed, what the assessments are and why they have been selected.
- Represent the job role accurately throughout the process.

Sifting:

- Use self-selection activities prior to direct selection.
- Explain the purpose of all sifting processes to applicants, particularly when they are not obviously job relevant (such as psychometric tests).
- Assess a range of relevant competencies at the early stages of the process, rather than one narrow ability (such as numerical reasoning).
- Use job-related exercises and tests, such as Situational Judgement Tests to communicate key aspects of the role.

Assessment Centres:

- Use exercises that reflect your employer brand, ie through parallels with the values of your own organisation.
- Use exercises that closely reflect what activities an individual will complete in a given job role.
- Build in organisational briefings and opportunities to interact with existing job incumbents.
- Consider using a location which is representative of where the Candidate will be working, if possible.
- Make the process interactive. Consider using the centre as a means to increase Candidates' self awareness.

Personnel:

- Carefully select internal Assessors to be exemplify your brand.
- Train Assessors to ensure the consistency of administration.
- Train Assessors and all related to personnel to consistently communicate aspects of the brand.

After the process:

- Inform Candidates of the selection decision as soon as possible.
- Provide comprehensive developmental feedback.

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About A&DC

Founded in 1988 by Nigel Povah, author of 'Assessment and Development Centres', A&DC is one of the leading experts in the Assessment and Development field. We combine our expertise in business psychology and behavioural change to create and deliver end-to-end solutions to HR issues across the talent management spectrum.

We work in partnership with our clients to unlock human potential, using best of breed processes to enable them to select, promote and develop talented people who can contribute effectively to business growth and cultural enhancement. Always, we apply recognised best practice, putting our clients in a position where they can minimise risk and optimise return on investment in these critical areas of people strategy.

Based in Surrey, our Consultants operate across the UK. Through our international partners, we ensure that our comprehensive portfolio of products and services is delivered through specialists with a high degree of local cultural and business insight.

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