

AC/DC Tools

In-Basket

- An in-basket simulates correspondence relating to a particular role
- Over the years, these exercises have been found to be among the most valid of AC-DC tools
- They give scope for exploration of a wide range of competencies
- The correspondence is seen as having built up over a period of a couple of weeks
- It will usually be a mixture of issues competing for priority
- It also can be about unresolved underlying tensions among the members of a management team are often indicated through a number of scenarios
- It can also relate to important decisions that needs to be taken by the manager on a short notice

Analysis Exercises

- These exercises are often based on case studies
- Here the participant has some complex written and/or numerical material to deal with, and will be required to prepare a paper summarizing understanding and making recommendations
- Sometimes the information presented will include correspondence and in that sense resembles the task given to the participant in an in-basket exercise
- However, the output required is a single coherent document
- In general, the coverage will be narrower for the analysis than for the in-basket

Group Discussions

- Group discussions vary between those dealing with a series of controversial issues, with no definite 'right answer', and those in which roles are assigned
- The topics are likely to be managerial issues and problems, eg common grading schemes, difficulties with an IT implementation or a project funding issue, etc.
- In a relatively large group, say six participants, there may be considerable variation in the amount of 'air time' achieved by the different individuals
- The total amount of information gathered on some participants becomes severely limited and hence the scope to rate them at all on some of the competencies becomes compromised
- Hence picking up GD as a tool needs to be done basis the competency that is being measured, e.g. dominance, assertiveness and vice versa empathy, consideration, managing meetings, etc.

Role Plays

- These exercises are cast in a one-to-one format
- Common scenarios are around negotiation, tough conversations with peer/subordinate, handling customer angst, career conversation with plateaued employee, handling discipline issues with a subordinate, coaching conversations, etc.
- The role-player's function is to give the participant enough and more scope to generate the behaviour required; staying in the role and optimizing opportunities for the participant to show his or her capabilities
- Role-playing requires specific training, as there is a need to give the participant the chance to demonstrate the competency
- In designing role-play exercises some care needs to be taken in the volume of information and the number of sub-topics to be addressed

Fact-finding Exercises

- These are also one-to-one interactive exercises, but the form of the interaction is limited
- The participant is in role, but the other party – sometimes referred to as a resource person – is not
- He or she acts as a repository of information, which can be accessed by the participant
- A situation is posed to the latter in which he or she has to make a decision or recommendation about an issue
- He or she is given limited information in advance and has to question the resource person to discover more facts on which to base a decision
- The efficiency of the questioning, in terms of the range of aspects of the situation explored, the elimination of possibilities and the avoidance of revisiting information already given, provides evidence of analytical competencies

Presentations

- One of the most common assessment tools
- Popularity may be attributed to familiarity that many line managers and other assessors have with presentations in other contexts
- Two potential pitfalls though:
 - One must be careful to distinguish between the form and the content – the 'how' and the 'what' – of the presentation
 - the 'how' may reflect competencies including communications and planning and organizing
 - the 'what' may be seen in strategic thinking and other competencies with an analytical or cognitive component
 - High chances of 'horns' or 'halo' effects intervening in the assessment process are high thus blurring the picture in what may be a largely non-interactive exercise

BEI

- One of the most powerful assessment tools
- Frequently but not invariably used to gather further information on competencies being measured as an additional data point
- Also used to measure competencies that are not amenable to any other AC tool
- The assessor prepares and then asks a range of behavioural questions using all the skills of behavioural interviewing
- Only trained and certified BEI interviewers can be used to leverage this tool to its full potential

NOTE ON DESIGNING IN-BASKETS

- Having established the competencies to measure you need to think about the range and volume of correspondence to include. Pack too many items in and you find most candidates delegate or hold over 80 or 90 per cent of the material, making it difficult to evaluate their approach or thought processes.
- If you are going to assess candidates from outside the type of organization concerned, care must be taken to see that they are not presented with scenarios requiring minute familiarity with internal operations if a level playing field is to be provided. Of course for some posts detailed and up-to-date knowledge is to be expected, but the trick is to get the balance right for the post and the anticipated candidate pool.
- Gather materials and ideas. The relevant organization is likely to be a fruitful source and there is nothing like delving into the actual in-basket of an incumbent, sifting through the contents with him or her and exploring the actions that have been taken to provide useful material. However, in a selection context this approach can be compromised in cases where there are internal and external candidates. This is especially so if one internal candidate is acting up in the role and so would actually be providing material against which he or she would be assessed.
- Consider the general form of the in-basket. Electronic delivery or not is one issue here. There is also the question of whether it is to be treated directly as a simulation with participants answering elements of correspondence or whether they are asked to comment on the implications, or to indicate a priority order.
- Further variations on the form can be attained by the use via the in-basket interviews or participant report forms or both of these.
- Establish if there are any special elements that need to be indicated and explored. This might be a *preparedness* to handle numerical information and as such will be distinguished from a capability with numbers that might be better addressed with numerical tests.
- Clarify instructions to candidates, for example pointing out that they actually need to do something with the material rather than simply passing it all on if assessments are going to be able to be broadly founded.
- Consider the style and tone of the correspondence. Again, utilization of existing correspondence sources will be an aid here. Other approaches if the designer of the material is not skilled as a pastiche writer will be to use several different authors.
- Utilize other sources about the context and operation, e.g. the internet, professional journals or the wider press.
- Determine whether the exercise is to be set as if in the actual organization or a fictional one. There are advantages to the latter, again particularly to provide and to be seen to be providing a level playing field for different participants.
- Write items mindful of the scope for each competency to be revealed.
- In drafting, consider scope to bring in a variety of different individuals, e.g. externals, senior management staff, peer-level colleagues. This will give scope for differentiation of responses in communications to these different constituencies and to bring in matters such as staff management and development or political sensitivity.
- In preparing an assessor guide as a first cut indicate which competencies most naturally fall out of work on each item and how these could be demonstrated. Then produce a chart indicating how well each competency is covered in the exercise as a whole and make amendments accordingly.

Electronic Mail Message

Date: 8/10 7:14 AM
Sender: Elise Thornton, Team D Supervisor
To: George Hudson, Port Director
Priority: Normal

Subject: Officer Garcia's Two-Week Notice

Officer Juan Garcia gave me his two-week notice today. He has applied and been accepted for a job in the Port of Grover. His last day of work will be Friday, August 21. Officer Garcia has worked in several ports over his seven years of service and has worked in Dillon for the past 18 months. We are losing an invaluable resource. He is the fifth officer to leave within the past six months.

I spoke with Officer Garcia. He is leaving because of problems here in Dillon. He was frank and told me what he thinks the problems are, and I have heard similar complaints from other officers. He also said several other officers are seeking other jobs because there is no sign that things will improve. Officer Garcia gave three major reasons:

- **Inferior Equipment** – We seem to be the last to get the equipment we need to support our mission. Our computers are several generations behind. Other electronic equipment is aging and unreliable.
- **Poor Working Conditions** – Our space was meant to house twenty people, not forty-one. Things will only get worse if we are able to fill our vacancies.
- **Lack of Management Support** – Upper management in this agency does not seem to care about the needs of its officers. In addition, all officers are overloaded because our five vacant officer positions have still not been filled.

We should look at these issues carefully before we lose any more officers.

Elise

Electronic Mail Message

Date: 8/7 10:45 AM
Sender: Sally Greer, Team A Supervisor
To: George Hudson, Port Director
Priority: Normal

Subject: Extended Medical Leave

George,

I thought I should alert you about some extended leave that I have just approved because it will, of course, put extra demands on my small staff. One of my Agriculture Specialists, Steven Owens, has asked for extended leave for foot surgery to correct damage to the nerves on both feet. His doctor feels that this surgery is necessary for him to be able to continue to perform his job duties.

He has tentatively scheduled surgery for August 26. The expected recovery period for this surgery is 4-6 weeks, during which he must stay off his feet as much as possible. He will require at least 3 weeks of bed rest. After that, he should be mobile. He will be requesting 3 weeks of sick leave beginning August 25. His leave balance is sufficient to cover this request.

He has provided me with a note from his physician and a completed form SF 71.

Thanks,
Sally