



## Getting to know your people

Assessment and testing gives HR teams a much clearer picture of the skills, and the people, in their organisation

“**T**he public sector’s recession starts now,” says Dave Rippon, Head of Organisational Development and Workforce Development at Sunderland City Council. Rippon explains that during the first recession government funding supported the public sector in order to aid the private sector, but that funding has dried up since the Coalition focused on private sector growth to avoid a second dip. Sunderland City Council has to cut costs by one third, which leaves Rippon’s HR department in a difficult situation.

With little or no budget for recruitment to fill vacancies, Rippon has utilised assessment and testing in order to establish the capabilities of his workforce, which has enabled him to identify where he might

have skills gaps. “We’re trying to explain that no-one has the potential to excel at everything, but everyone has potential to excel in something,” he says.

While the use of testing has been of great use to Rippon, he also notes that it has had a positive effect on employee engagement levels. If an organisation can help its employees into roles that fit their capabilities and can enable them to realise their potential, it creates the impression that the organisation has an active understanding of its workers, something that is valuable in the current climate. “A lot of people are moving because they’ve been displaced from their last job,” Rippon explains, “so coming into this process they are feeling rejected and unwanted. When you draw out people’s personal strengths they begin to see potential in themselves.”

We’re trying to explain that no-one has the potential to excel at everything, but everyone has potential to excel in something

In addition to the resourcing benefits recognised in Rippon’s example, assessment and testing is also useful to identify where public and private sector organisations need to be focusing their development efforts. “Even though people may not have that much money to spend on training and development programmes, if an organisation becomes aware of the fact that it has strength in certain areas and less strength in other areas which are clearly important to it, it can make use of internal resources to try to address some of those issues,” explains Charles Bethell-Fox, UK Managing Director of PDI Ninth House.

“Assessment and testing gives the organisation a better sense of what people can do,” he continues. “Therefore, it enables the organisation to put people into jobs that fit them better and it also enables organisations to leverage the talent they’ve got.” With this in mind, assessment and testing is a key tool to identify employees that have the potential to develop into future leaders, which can create a much clearer picture of an organisation’s talent pipeline and succession planning. “Organisations are increasingly interested in looking at leaders and getting a better

feeling for where leadership talent lies – whether that’s in terms of current performance, potential or readiness,” Bethell-Fox says.

While succession planning and recognising leadership is naturally a big priority for organisations, it is also extremely important to acknowledge gaps in talent at all levels of an organisation, as in Rippon’s example at Sunderland City Council. Eugene Burke, chief science and analytics officer at SHL, says: “It may be that the leaders are in the organisation, but not everybody is going to be a leader – you need people that are going to be good in operations, administration and general management. Not every general manager is going to get to the C-suite. If you’ve got a big gap in your talent profile then it can help to explain why performance might not be great.”

It is clear that assessment and testing can provide a great deal of value in terms of internal resourcing and recognising talent gaps, but it is also an invaluable tool when recruiting new talent, which is arguably where it is used most frequently. Traditionally assessment and testing in recruitment has focused on identifying applicants’ capabilities and potential for development, but Gabrielle Parry, Managing Director

at Saville Consulting, explains that the use of analytics and technology is introducing a new element to the use of testing in recruitment. “We are doing a lot of work with clients looking at values and culture fit,” she says. “Where values can be dissected and understood in terms of the key behaviours that sit underneath them, we are finding a very positive relationship between values-based recruitment and subsequent impact on satisfaction, engagement, retention and turnover.”

Acknowledging the values of an organisation and the individuals applying for jobs is a side of assessment and testing that is likely to grow in relevance moving forward – it could be argued that it adds a fourth dimension to the recruitment process. As Parry explains, if you can marry the values of an organisation to those of new recruits, the employees are more likely to align themselves to the future aspirations of the organisation, which should yield higher levels of engagement and greater retention rates.

The benefits of online assessment during the recruitment process have also become more apparent since the beginning of the recession. With levels >>



of unemployment rising, the number of applicants for vacancies is rising and the quality of those applicants is becoming more varied. Parry explains that: "As the economy tightens and jobs are few-and-far-between, the volume of applicants in popular areas has gone through the roof. Online assessment has transformed the way that organisations can assess larger numbers of people at the front end of assessment processes."

"How does an organisation handle 25,000 applications?" asks Steve O'Dell, Chief Executive of Talent Q. "We see the use of assessment at an early stage in large volume recruitment, whether that's for a customer service role or a graduate role. It offers a differentiation of candidates." O'Dell identifies graduate recruitment and volume recruitment as two of the main areas that will benefit from assessment because the qualifications and capabilities of the applicants are likely to be comparable. In these situations, unconscious bias can potentially play a role in the early stages of mass-scale recruitment, but the use of technology avoids that risk, O'Dell argues. "In choosing technology over human interaction, there is a cost reduction, as well as a fairness and objectivity added to the process. One of the benefits is that it increases your pace of hiring, increases quality of hiring and can reduce the cost of hiring."

As assessment and testing develops and organisations expect more from the service, it will be important to ensure that all aspects of the talent lifecycle are connected through testing – including recruitment, training, leadership development and, eventually, succession planning. "Traditionally certain

**If you've got a big gap in your talent profile then it can help to explain why performance might not be great**

forms of assessment were used for recruitment, other forms for development, other forms were used for

team building, other forms were used for coaching," O'Dell explains. "An individual's journey through an organisation was measured to death. That individual, for the most part, is a constant. There's some change and some elasticity, but actually personality and intelligence are relatively stable."

This suggests that it is important for organisations to ensure that there is continuity in assessment throughout a career because, while the process can lead to greater levels of employee engagement, if the employee feels as though they have to complete the same surveys on a regular basis with little signs of development, they will quickly switch off. In essence, the process should evolve with the employee.

The assessment and testing industry is one that appears to be evolving to meet the challenges that the recession has posed. Although this innovation would likely have happened on its own accord, it would appear that the recession certainly acted as a catalyst. Whether it is the acknowledgement of candidates' values at the recruitment stage, creating a picture of the talent in an organisation to plug skills gaps, or developing leadership capabilities for succession planning, assessment and testing is proving that it provides a great deal of value for talent management across all functions in an organisation. 