

CSSB: A LANDMARK IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASSESSMENT CENTRE METHOD

Below is a brief account of the first (and possible longest running) true assessment centre devised and used in a civilian context, written by one of its psychologist assessors, Jim Dukes. Not only was this AC a ground breaking assessment process, it was one in which psychologists played a major part in its creation. Jim's account offers a fascinating insight into the operation and development of the AC, and in the process provides some lessons that are still relevant today.

Professor Clive Fletcher

CSSB: A memoir and account by JIM DUKES

The success of the wartime WOSB* prompted the setting up of the Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB pronounced 'sissbee') to assess people for top jobs in the UK Civil Service. Chapman (1984) recorded its difficult history, which included strong opposition to the use of psychologists. Sadly unrecorded were early trials of a large variety of novel tests. By 1970 the procedure was highly controlled and detailed. There was strong emphasis on the ability to solve problems by identifying the significant factors in a confused situation, reduce them to order and make a balanced judgement of the course to pursue. Added to this was the need to communicate in speech and writing, to persuade and maintain good working relations. Candidates also had to have energy and staying power - reliability and the capacity to grow into the job were essential qualifications.

The procedure opened with a group discussion which helped candidates settle in and gave their assessors a useful first impression. The subsequent oral exercise was one in which candidates took it in turn to chair a committee solving a given problem. There were two written exercises. One contained the sort of complex problem described above. In the second the candidate had to answer a letter of complaint showing understanding of the writer's situation and replying firmly but tactfully (as civil servants have to answer for ministers who get far too many letters to answer themselves).

There were three assessors for each group of 5-6 candidates; Chairman, psychologist and (what came to be called) the Observer, the latter being a young high-flyer civil servant of something like five years' experience. Apart from generally assessing the candidates' performance each had a specialised role in interviewing them. The Observer engaged in an intellectual tussle in which the candidates had to defend propositions which they had suggested and respond to those made by the interviewer – aimed at seeing, amongst other things, if they could 'argue on their feet'. The psychologist explored their life history looking at their starting point in life, the advantages they had had, the obstacles they had overcome, and initiatives they had shown in order to assess their potential for growth and reliability. Increasingly they had to look at evidence for energy and staying power, as research showed that their performance during assessment could be misleading. Forceful candidates could turn out to be indolent; reserved candidates energetic. They were also tasked with assessing emotional stability, a subject on which the other assessors usually deferred to their judgement.

The Chairman had a roving brief and was free to cover the areas explored by the others. Chairman were far from the Sir Humphrey caricature of 'Yes Minister'. To maximise diversity they were drawn from many walks of life, including a BBC Head of Personnel, a retired admiral who ran a volunteer fire brigade, two well-known headmistresses, Lord Wolfenden, the chief engineer in the development of Concorde, the former ambassadors to Moscow, Bonn and Tokyo, three former heads of MI5, and a woman who was a former member of the Enigma cracking team and a black belt in judo! Diversity was further enhanced by using a range of psychologists from academia and consultancies.

The process was closely supervised by the experienced directing staff, who were well equipped to offer advice and guidance to assessors. The Director, Ken Murray, was a psychologist from WOSB days, who had designed much of the procedure. He was assisted by a couple of administrators, the retired head of GCHQ and a Chief Psychologist. They arranged the candidates into groups of five; occasionally six. The assessors rated candidates on a scales showing the necessary qualities, each assessor presenting their own evidence before giving a final rating. Sometimes a final mark was decided easily; sometimes after a long discussion. Ken Murray emphasised the importance of seeing candidates as a whole. Even best had weaknesses which had to be allowed for. While assessors wrote a report on the candidates, they were visited by one of the directing staff, who noted their main comments and checked against notes made from the candidates' records for discussion in the directing staff conference.

Great efforts were made to ensure fairness; that every candidate no matter what their background got an unbiased and understanding assessment. Some assessors were certainly better than others, but all were wholly devoted to the job. And we certainly disagreed among ourselves on occasion, but one had to respect opposing views. The unsuccessful candidates could be assured that they were given every chance to show their qualities by people anxious to find them. A special effort was made for candidates who were other than British born and bred. Given doubts about the validity of ability tests for candidates of different ethnicity, these were discounted in weighing against other evidence. Reports on such were carefully reviewed for bias.

CSSB was under constant criticism. A major objection was that that the procedure was subjective. This was unavoidable. Assessment is not pure science but a technology. Like any technology – aeronautics, bridge building, medicine and agriculture for example – practitioners work with vast gaps in established knowledge, having to rely on their judgement and experience. CSSB could be no different. For example, there is no science to determine the merit of a highly intelligent but not energetic candidate as compared to the merits of a less bright but industrious one. The CSSB procedure was open and outsiders were invited to comment on it. Some wanted a quota system for different ethnic groups. This was deemed unacceptable; only merit counted. Some critics were invited to sit in on a board. There was continual research checking results. Anstey's - the most thorough - showed an impressive correlation (.66) between CSSB assessments and subsequent measures of career success.

Over time, however, many things changed. Ken Murray was followed as Director by lay administrators lacking insight and experience, prone to dismissing some features of CSSB as being just psychologists' "fussing". Running the procedures became more mechanical and assessors were increasingly left without help or guidance. A further setback was when the costs of the procedure was attacked from on high. As always these were obvious and there

was no understanding of, or accounting for, the costs of failure which would come later. Posts were downgraded and filled by less capable people. The final blow came when, despite strong opposition in Parliament, the Blair administration decided that CSSB should be privatised - a story to be told by others.

Anstey, E (1976) A Thirty-year follow -up of the CSSB procedure, with lessons for the future. *Occupational Psychology* **50**(3), pp149-159

Chapman, R (1984) **Leadership in the British Civil Service**. Croom Helm

Dukes, J (1998) **Assessing Management People**. Routledge

- The acronym WOSB (pronounced ‘wosbee’) stood for War Office Selection Board, which was an Assessment Centre devised and used with great success in officer selection and other military contexts in the UK during WW2; it became the model for some of the earliest ACs used in a non-military context post-WW2. Although there were examples of AC-type exercises used in other countries in the 1930s, WOSB is clearly recognisable as the first ‘true’ assessment centre with most of the features we would expect to see in ACs today. The WOSBE approach was copied by the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in selecting potential secret agents. The OSS became what we know today as the CIA!

(Clive Fletcher)
