



The Assessment Center approach provides insight into applicants' decision-making ability.

The Assessment Center Approach: A Law Enforcement Hiring Tool



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September 2016

Assessment Center testing helps reveal a candidate's real-world decision-making ability

The Background

Since the advent of police civil service testing, the primary method of selecting the right candidate for law enforcement agencies has relied on a prescribed testing process that consists of a written exam, physical fitness test, medical history and assessment, polygraph and background investigations, as well as a psychological evaluation.

Although this process tests academic ability, the ability to carry out the physical essential functions of a law enforcement officer, as well as providing a tool to determine if a candidate is psychologically fit for the "job", it does not test for other basic characteristics, which can lead to delayed or poor decision making while "on the job." When decision-making abilities are inadequate, the result may be officer injuries and increased liability to the police department.

It is conceded in this paper that one of the function of the polygraph examination in the hiring process is geared towards highlighting honesty/truthfulness about a candidate's past; however, it does not predict honesty and integrity on the job.

Although the current testing process is required by the state, candidates in the hiring process are ranked based on their ability to prepare for these tests. Preparation can be done by purchasing resources and making multiple attempts, each of which increases familiarity with the tests, process, and expected responses. The process also does not capture the ability of a candidate to make good decisions based on the following characteristics:

- Honesty and Integrity
- "Coach-ability"
- Service orientation
- Emotional impulse control
- Communication skills
- Work ethic/initiatives

For many years, police professionals complained that the testing process had very little relationship to actual job requirements and tended to favor "good test takers" and did little to test for the skills and abilities actually needed to successfully perform the job of a police officer. The result was that people were hired as police officers who couldn't make proper decisions, engage in regular police work, and could not properly document the evidence in a police report—all of which can increase the likelihood of officer injury and third-party liability. So a new method of testing candidates began being used across the United States called an "Assessment Center Testing Process."

What is an Assessment Center?

An Assessment Center is not a *place*. It is a testing *process* in which candidates participate in a series of systematic, job related, real-life situations, either written, oral, or actual scenarios, all the while being observed and evaluated by experts in policing, supervision, and management. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the benefits of completing the Assessment Center in a written format, which provides multiple benefits: allowing for evaluation of a candidate's decision-making thought processes, as well as their ability to properly document their actions.

Trained evaluators, called "assessors" can read a candidate's response to a purposed scenario. This allows the assessor to review the candidate's ability to formulate their thought processes, communication skills, and writing skills, all of which are important skills in performing the duties of a law enforcement officer. These scenarios are not based on academics, rather they attempt to simulate actual working conditions. This difference separates Assessment Center testing from the academic orientation of written exams and much of the subjectivity of oral tests.

A Brief History of Assessment Centers

During World War II, agents of the Office of Strategic Command (OSS) came to realize that pure academic training and education were not adequately preparing their operatives for wartime situations. Their people scored well on academic tests, but sometimes didn't perform well under pressure and were unable to apply academic principles to real people, places, and things. The OSS developed a series of scenarios

tests that placed operatives into situations that required specific performance behaviors that must be successfully performed under the conditions they would face on actual assignment. This combination of a written curriculum with situational exercises produced superior personnel. The private sector quickly began using this testing methodology for selecting and promotion and it has now spread to the police testing process. (Dr. Larry F. Jetmore).

CIRMA has seen an increase in Law Enforcement Liability claims. Although a majority of these claims may not have been preventable, a number of them had a common theme: poor decision making. As a result the CIRMA Law Enforcement Advisory Committee created the Law Enforcement Hiring Sub-Committee and tasked them with finding if there was another tool, in addition to the existing testing process, that could test for decision-making skills based on the six (6) characteristics mentioned previously in this paper. During a series of meetings, the Hiring Sub Committee began to focus on the idea of Assessment Centers.

Historically, because the Assessment Center was a staged scenario requiring staff to play the roles and to evaluate the responses, it could be a strain on department resources and finances. Because of this, it was proposed that the Assessment Center be a written exam. A written format reduces the financial and staffing resources needed. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on this delivery format; however, departments may choose to expand the delivery of this process based on their unique financial and staffing resources. This will provide an additional tool to police departments in order to allow them to hire the right candidate that will succeed in today's complex world of law enforcement.

Assessment Centers: Definition and Development

The development of the testing questions, grading protocols, along with sample questions with grading will be presented in this paper.

In its May 1989 publication, "Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Center Operations," the International Congress on Assessment Center Method endorsed the following definition of an Assessment Center –

"An Assessment Center consists of:

- A standardized evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs.
- Multiple trained observers and techniques are used.
- Judgments about behavior are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment scenarios.
- These judgments are pooled in a meeting among the assessors or by a statistical integration process.
- In an integration discussion, comprehensive accounts of behavior, and often ratings of it, are pooled.
- The discussion results in evaluations of the performance of the assessed on the dimensions or other variables the Assessment Center is designed to measure.
- Statistical combination methods should be validated in accord with professionally accepted guidelines."

Beyond this description, there are other essential elements you must include in a selection process for it to be considered an Assessment Center.

The first step in conducting an Assessment Center is identifying and analyzing the behaviors relevant to the job to be filled. These behaviors must then be classified into meaningful and relevant categories. Before beginning the process, develop ways to evaluate the identified dimensions, or standards, each candidate will be measured against.

How Situational Scenarios Can Be Developed

CIRMA's Law Enforcement Hiring Sub-Committee began developing questions in a method similar to how situational exercises (mini-tests) are used in more traditional examinations. It begins with the completion of a "job task analysis" specific to the characteristics previously mentioned. Keeping in mind that this process is being presented as a tool for hiring entry level police officers an in-depth discussion on what the expected knowledge level would be regarding law enforcement situations and expectations.

Assessment center tests help measure Critical Success Factors

The committee looked at the specific knowledge, skills, behaviors, and characteristics considered to be the most important to successfully performing the job of an entry level police officer. After these “critical work characteristics” were identified, the question development began.

The developed questions (sample is presented later in this paper) were designed to capture at least one critical characteristic each; in some cases several characteristics. The development of these types of questions provide departments with an ability to evaluate whether a candidate has the desired critical work characteristics required for a law enforcement career. In Assessment Center testing, these are known as “critical success factors” or “testing dimensions.” They are the criteria against which candidates are evaluated and tested. Here are some examples of “critical success factors” that might be considered:

1. Oral Communication: Effective expression when presenting ideas to an individual or group (includes non-verbal communication).
2. Written Communication: Clear expression of ideas in writing and use of correct form.
3. Planning and Organizing: Establishing a course of action for self and/or others to achieve organizational goals; maintaining appropriate records; use of computer resources.
4. Control: Taking action to coach, monitor, evaluate and correct job tasks, activities, and responsibilities of subordinates.
5. Environmental Awareness: Managing change. Using knowledge of changing situations and pressures inside and outside of the department to identify potential problems and opportunities.
6. Organizational Integrity: Action that indicates support for and maintenance of departmental standards, norms, goals, and ethics.
7. Interpersonal Sensitivity: Actions that indicate attention to the needs, feelings, and expressions of others. (*Dr. Larry F. Jetmore*).

Obviously, under each of these testing dimensions there could be hundreds of corresponding identifiable behaviors. The more specifically the Assessment Center measures the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes of a candidate in the test dimensions listed above, the more valid and reliable the test is. Therefore, the sample questions, provided later in this paper, were created based on several actual law enforcement incidents.

These scenarios were created so that the entry level candidates do not have to have specific knowledge of law enforcement protocols, constitutional law, or specific procedures to take the assessment. Instead the assessment scenarios capture the critical work characteristics and thought-processes of the candidate. (With each sample question is a list of possible good answers and possible poor answers.)

CIRMA recommends that agencies that choose to implement a written Assessment Center develop a standard set of scenario-based questions that can be given to all candidates who reach this level in the hiring process.

It is recommended that this step in the hiring process be noted and clearly communicated to all applying candidates, along with language stating that candidates should notify the testing recruitment officer of any additional testing accommodation they may need to complete this or any other step in the hiring process.

Grading:

Once test questions have been developed, a grading protocol needs to be put in place. Because subjectivity in grading can be assumed, the Sub-Committee looked into ways to ensure candidates received a fair and accurate score. They looked at several best practices in test grading. It was determined that a range system from 0 to 5 was the best approach. The better the answers the candidate provides, the higher on the scale the assessor can score, with a high of 5 or a low of 0.

Sgt. Jeremiah Johnson, Ph.D., Darien Police Department, outlined his experience in taking qualifying examinations in his doctoral program at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Comprehensive essay-based examinations were graded by three assessors who individually scored his responses. The three scores were then added

together. In order to pass the examination, the combined score had to reach a minimum threshold. This process assumes subjectivity in the grading; however, it eliminates the opportunity for bias as each assessor will have a different perspective. This method is in line with the recommendation outlined in the “Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Center Operations”:

- Have multiple assessors observe and evaluate each candidate. They all must receive thorough training and demonstrate knowledge of the dimensions, rating methodology, feedback, and other necessary skills used to conduct the assessment. Thus, they will be able to use the agreed-upon systematic procedure to record specific behavioral observations accurately at the time of their occurrence.
- After an assessment has been completed, each assessor must prepare a report of the observations made during each exercise and create a group report together. The integration of behaviors—data integration—must be based on a pooling of information gathered at a meeting of all assessors, averaging the scores, and ranking the candidates.
- Careful and redundant reviews should be made of the scores to ensure that mathematical errors have not been made. This process will ensure that scores are not skewed, either good or bad.

The Hiring Sub-Committee then took the questions and presented them to a CIRMA Risk Management Consultant who was unfamiliar with the testing process. The grading results demonstrated that there was subjectivity; however, each assessor was well within the expected range on most questions, with several outliers on others. If these outliers were the sole grade that determined pass or fail status, the staff member would not have fared well. However, as part of an averaged score of at least three assessors, they were normalized, thus supporting the theory and process.

Based on this finding, it is recommended that when implementing the Assessment Center process into your testing program, that scoring is completed by at least three assessors with the scores averaged.

A sample of the questions and answers are included on page 6.

What do you do with poorly answered questions...?

Once you have delivered the Assessment Center and have had it evaluated, as with any test there will be some individuals who do not score well overall or on individual questions. There are several scenarios to consider:

1. Because this would be an additional step in the hiring process, and not required by state and POST-C guidelines, it would be left up to the individual department to determine if this would be used as a disqualifying exam or as a tool used in the ultimate hiring decision.
2. The hiring officer, most likely the Department Chief, can expand on the poorly answered questions on during the Chief’s interview process.
3. The Assessment Center scoring results can be used as a tool in the ranking process of candidates.

Keep in mind that as an additional tool to help departments hire those candidates who have the critical work characteristics of the department, this process must be implemented and utilized consistently. A consistent implementation with a transparent documented process reduces any potential discrimination claims.

Assessor Selection

As the exercises are being developed, you should begin selecting the assessors. As mentioned in the grading section, it is recommended that at least three assessors review the candidate’s written answers. Agencies should choose assessors from several different divisions within the department, for example and FTO, Senior Patrolman, Sgt. and a Detective. A range of positions and diversity in age, gender, ethnicity and experience will provide a wider perspective.

The selected assessors should be made aware of the time commitment involved. It can cause potential liability if one of your assessors leaves in the middle of an exercise because he or she no longer wants to participate.

The hiring process should be consistently applied

Assessor Training

One of the first steps in the assessor training process is the creation of an assessor orientation manual, which contains the created questions, sample proper answers, and guidelines for poor answers, rating methodology, and other key information that each assessor may need to know. The assessors should receive these manuals once they have been appointed, and/or accept the assignment. Review of the manual should take place at least one to two weeks before candidates are given the written assessment test. This will provide an opportunity for the assessors to ask questions and clarify the protocols and expected standards.

An assessor training session should be conducted before the tests are administered to the applying candidates. This training should, at a minimum, include a review of the assessor orientation manual and types of answers to the questions they may see. It is just as important that the candidate have an understanding of what the Assessment Center process is and how it will be used in the hiring process. It's a best practice to communicate to the applicants the schedule, dimensions, and the types of exams included in the hiring process.

Assessor Grading

Each assessor can assign one of six grades per essay question: 3-5 (excellent), 2 (satisfactory), 1 (poor), or 0 (fail). In order to pass the assessment, the applicant must receive a total of at least four points. Some guidelines for consideration are:

- Assessors should not confer with each other or discuss candidate responses.
- Candidate **numbers**, rather than names, should be attached to the response. This is especially important if the assessors are participating in the oral interviews.
- The assessors' primary grading focus should be on the content (decision-making ability) rather than the form or style (e.g. spelling, sentence structure).

Where do you place the Assessment Center in the testing process? And what's the cost?

The question police agencies must answer before choosing to include an Assessment Center style test in the hiring process is why they are doing it. What are the benefits? Why not simply rely on the established testing guidelines and current process such as a Chief's interview, polygraph reports, and current psychological testing protocols?

Assessment Center type testing processes are not meant to stand alone. They should really be used as one part of an comprehensive hiring process. Before using an Assessment Center, a law enforcement agency should have clearly stated policies and procedures in place and communicated to those who will be evaluating the written, oral, or practical answers. This step in the process also needs to be clearly stated in the application phase so that any candidate understands that this will be part of the hiring process and can expect that they must successfully complete the test.

Historically, the Assessment Center represented a significant part of the cost of the hiring process. It required departments to assign staff as participants in the scenarios as well as staff to evaluate the candidate's responses. This was typically covered by overtime, further straining a department's budget. The CIRMA Risk Management Hiring Sub-Committee concluded that despite the cost, time, and effort needed to conduct an Assessment Center, they are still an effective way to evaluate applying candidates.

However, because the Hiring Sub Committee realized that the departments may not be open to investing large portions of their budgets to set up and execute actual scenario testing centers, they come up with the recommendation that the Assessment Center be given in a **written** format. This type of implementation of the Assessment Center allows departments to introduce candidates to the unique job-rated, multi-dimensional scenarios a police officer experiences, while also testing their decision-making abilities and ability to clearly communicate and document their thought processes. It also provides insight into the more academic part of law enforcement: documentation, which is not tested in the current written exam.

It is recommended that the Assessment Center test be part of the written examination process. At this level of the testing process, it minimally increases costs associated with proctoring the test. However, because it is recommended that the test be given in written format, departments may choose to place the examination at alternate steps in the

hiring process, such as with the oral interview or the psychological testing. Regardless of where the test is administered, it is imperative that the test is administered consistently to each candidate during the hiring process.

Directions to the candidate for taking the examination in a written format

You are responsible for budgeting your time during this examination. You have a total of thirty (30) minutes to each of the scenarios presented in this exam. Although these scenarios are based on potential situations a police officer will encounter, specific knowledge of law enforcement procedures is not required. You should review each questions carefully and answer to the best of your ability, ensuring that you document how you would handle each scenario based on the information presented. The test proctors are not able to assist in the interpretations or offer any information not contained within the exam scenario. The test proctors will advise when there is 10 minutes left, again at with 5 minutes remaining, and will then notify you when the allotted testing time has expired. Once the time has expired you will submit your test materials to the proctor. Grading will be completed in accordance with the departments testing and hiring procedures.

Should you need assistance or additional accommodations to take the examinations, you must notify the proctor prior to the start of the examination.

Sample Question:

Note: Sample questions and responses shown below have been graded based on the grading process outlined previously.

- While on patrol you stop initiate a traffic stop of a vehicle for a red light violation, you have no reason to believe the driver committed any other violations and no reason to believe they pose a danger. They have been compliant to your requests thus far. You ask the driver to exit the vehicle and he refuses to comply with this request. What do you do...?

Suggested answer:

- Proceed with the traffic stop for the red light violation using officer discretion (infraction, written warning, verbal warning, etc.

Not suggested answer:

- State that he is refusing to comply and use force or threaten the driver to remove the driver from the car.

Actual answers given by recruit in academy class:

1. "...I would let them go. I wouldn't want to detain them longer than it takes to do the traffic stop..."

This answer matches the above suggested answer. It shows the officer beginning the investigatory process but when he reaches an impasse without any further evidence, he is able to make the decision to simply issue the violation in accordance with what is legally available to the officer.

2. "...At the time I would investigate why, and call my supervisor to get proper clarification on what I am allowed to do. I would take them out of the car if they continue to refuse my request. If need be I would implement some level of use of force, prior to my supervisor's arrival, to ensure officer safety. If they are refusing there must be a reason..."

This second answer provides insight into a couple of characteristics that are not captured in regular academic testing. In indicating that he would contact a supervisor, the answer reveals that the officer is not comfortable with making decisions. Additionally the second part of the answer identifies potentially overly aggressive, egocentric attributes that can lead to potential liability, specifically the unwarranted use of force.

These attributes, and characteristics are typically not captured in the current hiring/testing process, mostly they are identified in the FTO phase of the candidate's career. Once identified at this level, a proper and legal separation of employment with an officer maybe costly when considering the amount of time, payroll and expenses have

For additional information on this topic, please contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant.

been placed into the candidate. Additional concern is in the potential liability associated with this officer making poor decisions. These decisions can lead to potential costly litigation, settlements and jury decisions, as well as having a negative impact on the department's reputation.

Summary

Successful police officers need to have good decision-making ability to ensure their safety and ensure the first mission of law enforcement: the preservation of life and property.

Whether your department has a large number of applicants or low number, hiring the right candidate is not an easy task. While the current process tests for academic ability, physical ability, and appropriate background, there is not much emphasis on the critical success factors. Departments rely on the current process to give them clear indication of which candidate will make the right fit within their organization; however, the current process does not give insight into the candidate's decision-making ability based on the characteristics and qualities mentioned earlier. It is usually only after a significant financial investment by the department that it is determined if a candidate has these qualities.

While there is not any one test that can guarantee a candidate's success, or prevent any potential liability, a written/hybrid Assessment Center that is included into the testing process may identify early-on those candidates that, although able to pass the academic and physical ability tests, and even the polygraph test, may not be able to make the appropriate decisions needed in law enforcement, regardless of training. Therefore, it is recommended that police departments implement the written/hybrid Assessment Center test into the current hiring and testing process.

Resources

Police Recruitment and Selection: What Does the Evidence Say?, Jeremiah Johnson, Ph.D.
www.CIRMA.org/Publications/Whitepapers

The Connecticut Interlocal Risk Management Agency, CIRMA, is Connecticut's leading provider of municipal risk financing and risk management services. A member-owned and governed agency, CIRMA provides high quality insurance for municipalities, school districts, and local public agencies. CIRMA operates two risk pools, the Workers' Compensation and the Liability-Auto-Property pool. It also provides Heart & Hypertension claims services and claims administration and risk management services to self-insured municipalities. CIRMA's financial strength enables it to provide assured rate stability, open availability, and expert risk management and claims services.

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