

29 Oct 2021

Selection methods

Reviews candidate assessment methods as part of the recruitment process, focusing on interviews, psychometric tests and assessment centres.

Introduction

Selecting staff has two main stages: shortlisting and assessment. In both stages employers should ensure that their selection methods treat candidates fairly, without discrimination or bias, and that selections are made based on the candidate's ability to perform the role, contribute to the organisation and their potential for development.

This factsheet focuses on the assessment stage of the selection process for the employer and candidate, including the methods of interviewing, assessment centres and psychometric testing. It covers the limitations of interviewing and how organisations might avoid common pitfalls. Finally, it takes a closer look at the practicalities of these methods, and pre-employment checks such as references.

How are job candidates selected?

Selecting candidates involves two main processes: shortlisting, and assessing applicants to decide who should be made a job offer. This factsheet focuses on assessment using interviews, psychometric testing and assessment centres. For more on the recruitment process generally, see our [recruitment factsheet](#). Our [Recruitment and selection law Q&As](#) for CIPD members give more details on UK law.

Everyone involved in the selection process, from the shortlisting stage onwards, must understand not only the need to avoid unfair discrimination and the potential risk to the organisation's reputation should a candidate make a tribunal claim, but the benefits a diverse workforce can bring to an organisation.

Our report [A head for hiring: the behavioural science of recruitment and selection](#) discusses the way people make decisions and how hardwired systematic biases affect how we select and evaluate candidates. Our report [Diversity and inclusion at work: facing](#)

[up to the business case](#) also outlines some common barriers to diversity in the recruitment process and practical recommendations to tackle them. This knowledge can help resourcing professionals improve outcomes and ensure the recruitment process is fair and robust. Our [Resourcing and Talent Planning survey](#) suggests that employers offer greater work flexibility and improved work-life balance to reduce recruitment difficulties.

Selection process considerations

There's a range of factors to consider when choosing a selection method, including the role itself, available resources and the method's validity. Some methods are more reliable than others in predicting performance on the job, but may be more resource intensive to administer. Whichever method is used, the candidate experience and length of recruitment process is important.

Recruiters should tell candidates in advance what to expect from the selection process, including how long it will take, what technology will be used, the type of assessment they will undergo and ensure the process is not unnecessarily long. Employers should also check whether the applicant has any need for adjustments due to a disability. See more on accommodating [neurodiversity](#) in the selection process.

Technology plays an increasingly important role in recruitment ranging from attracting candidates through to the selection process and then digital work itself, as remote and hybrid working are likely to last. Online recruitment can mean employers receive large numbers of applications, which automation can help to manage. Our [Resourcing and talent planning survey](#) found that technology is being used increasingly to conduct interviews or run assessments online. AI and 'gamification' are also being used as part of the selection process to assess potential performance and ability. Organisations must assess any technology before adopting it, making sure it's been robustly tested, provides a good candidate experience, and is fair and inclusive. There's more in our factsheet on [Artificial intelligence and automation in the workplace](#). Also, we offer learning points on leveraging technology to improve recruitment in our [Using technology to improve hiring and onboarding](#) article.

The role of selection interviewing

After a short-listing process, interviews are very widely used in the selection process, as demonstrated by our successive surveys of recruitment practices. Interviews can be structured in various ways, with competency-based interviews and the content of CVs and application forms being very common, according to our latest [Resourcing and talent](#)

planning survey.

For the employer, the interview is an opportunity to:

- Gauge candidates' experience and ability to perform in the role.
- Explain the employee value proposition, including learning opportunities and employee benefits.
- Give the candidate a positive impression of the organisation as a good employer.

For the candidate, the interview is an opportunity to:

- Understand the job and its responsibilities in more detail.
- Ask questions about the organisation and the employee value proposition.
- Decide whether they would like to take the job if offered it.

Despite their popularity as a selection method, evidence highlights the limitations of the traditional interview and can be prone to bias.

Drawing on a range of research, Anderson and Shackleton summarise the common weaknesses of interviews:

- **Self-fulfilling prophecy effect** - Interviewers may ask questions designed to confirm initial impressions of candidates gained either before the interview or in its early stages.
- **Stereotyping effect** - Interviewers sometimes assume that particular characteristics are typical of members of a particular group. In the case of sex, race, disability, marital status or ex-offenders, decisions made on this basis are often illegal. However, the effect occurs in the case of all kinds of social groups.
- **Halo and horns effect** - Once interviewers rate candidates as 'good' or 'bad' in some aspects, they often replicate this judgement across the board, reaching unbalanced decisions.
- **Contrast effect** - Interviewers can allow the experience of interviewing one candidate to affect the way they interview others who are seen later in the selection process.
- **Similar-to-me effect** - Interviewers sometimes give preference to candidates they perceive as having a similar background, career history, personality or attitudes to themselves.
- **Personal liking effect** - Interviewers may make decisions on the basis of whether they personally like or dislike the candidate.

Our behavioural science research suggests that to avoid instinctive or hasty judgements interviewers should pre-commit to a set of interview questions that are directly related to performance on the job. Structuring the interview can help improve its ability to predict performance in the job. A structured interview means that:

- Questions are planned carefully before the interview.
- All candidates are asked the same questions.
- Answers are scored using a rating system.
- Questions focus on the attributes and behaviours needed in the job only.

There is a risk, however, of having an overly rigid approach in which there is little opportunity to ask the candidate supplementary questions and the candidate does not feel at ease, so a balance is needed.

To ensure fair and successful selection, it's best to use several methods in the decision-making process. Insights from the interview should be supported by other data where possible, for example psychometric tests or task simulation activities, which could be conducted at interview stage or with technology beforehand.

It's important that selection interviews are conducted professionally. Everyone involved in assessing candidates should have the necessary skills (for example in interviewing and testing) and have been adequately briefed about the job in question and its requirements.

A poor interview experience can undermine an employer's brand as candidates might share their unfavourable impression of the organisation with other potential applicants and customers. Following up with candidates in a timely manner, and giving feedback following an interview demonstrates appreciation of their time and enhances the candidate experience.

Psychometric testing

Tests have become an important part of the selection process and can benefit the overall talent management process. Evidence suggests that standardised tests or tests of cognitive ability can be good predictors of job performance, especially for occupations that require complex thinking, although test results should never be the sole basis for a selection decision. See more in our report [A head for hiring: the behavioural science of recruitment and selection](#).

Used correctly, psychometric tests allow employers to systematically assess individual differences (for example in ability, aptitude or personality). They are often administered online, particularly when assessing high volumes of applicants.

Tests should be supported by a body of statistical evidence which demonstrates their validity and reliability. Most tests are developed by occupational psychologists and should be accompanied by detailed manuals that explain how test scores should be used so that employers can compare their test candidates against benchmark scores of similar people (also known as a norm group). Administering tests and analysing the results is a skilled task and requires training and certification; the [British Psychological Society](#) set clear standards on testing and test use.

Before using a test, recruiters should:

- Ensure that those involved in administering tests have had appropriate training to do so.
- Consider whether it is appropriate to use a test at all (will it provide additional relevant information, and is it relevant to the job/person specification).
- Identify who will choose, recommend and assess the value of tests.
- Check the copyright of tests and conditions of use.
- Decide how the results will be used.
- Identify potential equal opportunities issues (that is, whether the tests will disadvantage certain groups, or might need to be adapted).
- Establish a process for giving feedback.
- Decide how test results will be stored and who will have access to them.

Job applicants should:

- Be given advance notice to make any practical arrangements to enable them to take the tests.
- Be told about test requirements and duration of tests beforehand and have the opportunity to raise queries or request adjustments.
- Have access to an appropriate environment in which to take the tests.
- Be made aware of feedback arrangements.

It's also helpful to provide some examples of what the test questions cover and where possible link to practice tests, especially where candidates may not have come across psychometric assessment before (for example, in graduate recruitment).

Assessment centres

Assessment centres are used for selection as well as promotion and professional development purposes. They require candidates to complete several different tasks and often combine behavioural ratings, cognitive and personality assessments obtained from

multiple sources.

The tasks set should clearly relate to the person specification and reflect the reality of the job. They must be administered in a systematic way, with candidates being given the same types and numbers of tasks to complete in the same time, so that they have equal opportunity to demonstrate their abilities.

Depending on the nature of the job, tasks might include individual or group work, written and/or oral input, and tasks prepared in advance as well as those performed solely on the day. This could involve delivering a report or presentation, time management or task prioritisation exercises, individual problem solving, group discussions, simulations of business activities, or functional role-play.

Assessment centres should be overseen by experienced selectors to ensure objectivity and consistency. Selectors must be trained to observe, actively listen, record, classify and rate behaviour, and seek evidence accurately and objectively against the job description and person specification. They will preferably have had training in interview skills and diversity.

A feedback session with either an occupational psychologist or someone trained to deliver feedback is of benefit to candidates and indicates the organisation is serious about fair selection.

The British Psychological Society's Division of Occupational Psychology has created a comprehensive standard focused on the design and delivery of assessment centres. Its purpose is to raise the standard of assessment centres by identifying and improving poor practice. The CIPD contributed to this standard which covers: specifying the purpose, scope and designing the centre, the standards of competence and professional behaviour required of the different roles involved, delivery and data integration and decision making, appropriate reporting and feedback of results, managing the data derived including access, use and storage and finally evaluation of centres.

Using references

Any offer of employment should be conditional on satisfactory clearance of pre-employment checks such as references from the candidate's previous employer(s). References should contain factual information such as length of past employment, job title, brief details of responsibilities, overall performance, time-keeping and reason for leaving. However, recruitment decisions should never be based solely on references as they provide a limited perspective of an individual's suitability for a role. CIPD members can find more legal detail in our References Q&As.

Additional pre-employment checks are needed if, for example, the job involves working with children or vulnerable adults.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

British Psychological Society's Psychological Testing Centre

International Test Commission

Books and reports

JACKSON, D.J.R., LANCE, C.E. Lance and HOFFMAN, B.J. (eds) (2012) *The psychology of assessment centers*. New York: Routledge. pp95-120.

NIKOLAOU, I. and OOSTROM, J.K. (eds) (2015) *Employee recruitment, selection and assessment: contemporary issues for theory and practice*. New York: Psychology Press.

OLIVEIRA, T.C. (2015) *Rethinking interviewing and personnel selection*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

TAYLOR, S. (2018) *Resourcing and talent management*. 7th ed. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Visit the CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

BOOLKAH, P. (2021) How managers can attract and retain talent. *People Management*. 15 October.

JACOBS, K. (2018) Is psychometric testing still fit for purpose? *People Management* (online). 22 February.

McCOLL, R. and MICHELOTTI, M. (2019) Sorry, could you repeat the question? Exploring video-interview recruitment practice in HRM. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Vol 29, Issue 4, November. pp 637-656. Reviewed *In a Nutshell*, issue 94.

NGA, E. and SEARS, G. (2010) The effect of adverse impact in selection practices on organizational diversity: a field study. *International Journal of Human Resource*

Management. Vol 21, No 9. pp. 1454-1471.

STONE, D. L., LUKASZEWSKI, K. M., and STONE-ROMERO, E. F. (2013). Factors affecting the effectiveness and acceptance of electronic selection systems. *Human Resource Management Review*. Vol 23, No 1, March. pp1-21.

TAYLOR S. (2018). *Resourcing and Talent Management* (7th edition). CIPD: London, UK.

UPADHYAY, A.K. and KHANDELWAL, K. (2018) Applying artificial intelligence: implications for recruitment. *Strategic HR Review*. Vol 17, No 1. pp255-258.

CIPD members can use our [online journals](#) to find articles from over 300 journal titles relevant to HR.

Members and *People Management* subscribers can see articles on the [People Management](#) website.

This factsheet was last updated by Dr Gill Maxwell.