



# KCP learning

# ACT

## fact sheet 2: history of assessment centres

### History of Assessment Centres

#### Germany

The first discernible multiple assessment approach to selection can be traced to military officer recruitment in Germany from 1929 onwards.

The competencies required of potential officers were defined as:

**Positive will** - a habit of voluntary response to the command of the superior leader

**Determination** - the creation of means to achieve the goal and the achievement of a goal

**Operative thinking** - planning and executing a preconceived action

**Mental elasticity** - the ability to live up to any situation in order to achieve a goal

#### Mathematical thinking

**Character** - integrity, selflessness, idealism

The assessors were:

**Two officers (one of whom a colonel who made the final decision)**

**One medical doctor**

**Three psychologists**

The techniques employed included:

#### Tests of cognitive ability

**Personality assessment via observation of a choice reaction test (in this case hand and foot reactions to a large series of visual and auditory stimuli)**

**A demanding obstacle course that required the candidate to carry out a series of complex tasks**

**Observation of a leadership task**

So, here we have the earliest example of an organisation using multiple assessment techniques with multiple assessors to measure multiple competencies.



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### United Kingdom

Up until the summer of 1942, British Army officers were selected on the basis of a short interview. Candidates typically came from public schools that included an army cadet force. The decision to put someone forward for officer training was made entirely intuitively and the characteristics that were assessed had little or nothing to do with subsequent performance.

In 1942, following pressure from Parliament, the British set up War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs). Modelled quite closely on the German approach, the WOSBs included psychiatric interviews, intelligence tests and simulated command tasks. Lasting 3 or 4 days, these selection boards culminated in an assessment of the candidate's performance against 17 areas of competence that were thought to be indicators of officer potential.

A year later, the content of the WOSBs was modified. Abandoning some of the tasks that owed much to the German model, the new process included leaderless group problem solving exercises that required teamwork and cooperation; individual tasks included presentations and no fewer than eight stress interviews.

The first non-military use of multiple assessment techniques was also found in the UK. Dating from 1945, the Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB) introduced a three phase system for recruiting middle to high level civil servants. The second phase of this process included verbal and non-verbal tests, projective personality measures, interviews, an examination, individual exercises including a presentation, and group exercises.

The assessors - **two civil servants and a psychologist** - would share information following the centre, and then independently rate each candidate's potential.



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### United States

Although the Office of Strategic Services made use of multiple assessment during the Second World War, the most significant development in the US was the first assessment centre procedure to be used in the private sector.

The American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) in 1956 identified 25 management characteristics that were assessed via

**A 2 hour interview**

**An in-tray exercise**

**A leaderless group discussion**

**A business game**

**A range of projective tests and cognitive tests**

The assessors at AT&T included **industrial or clinical psychologists, company personnel and university staff.**

As an interesting aside, we have AT&T to thank for the term Assessment Centre. This was a physical building where the candidates foregathered to be assessed!

### Summary

Assessment centres are not, then, a new idea. With a history stretching back over 80 years, military, public and private sector organisations have recognised the need to assess leadership and managerial characteristics using multiple assessment methods and multiple assessors.