

Everything you wanted to know about Assessment Centres



Many opinions are better than one, especially when a company decides whom to promote and how to develop his management potential – William C. Byham

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About the paper:

The purpose of this paper is to describe the historical origin of Assessment centres, the concept of Assessment Centres, Essential elements of an Assessment Centre, Objectives for conducting Assessment Centres, Different stages in a typical Assessment Centre, Various exercises used for the purpose of assessment, Advantages and disadvantages of Assessment Centres, Positive outcomes of Assessment centres and different methods for assessing validity of Assessment Centres.

Finally, the paper highlights global trends and practices in Assessment Centres.

This paper explores the following questions:

1. Why are assessment centres required?
2. What is the historical origin of assessment centre concept?
3. How are assessment centres defined by practitioners, academicians etc?
4. What can be and can not be called an assessment centres?
5. What are the essential elements of an assessment centre?
6. What are the various purposes for which assessment centres are used?
7. What are the different stages in a typical AC and what activities are performed in these different stages?
8. What different types of exercises are used in as assessment centres?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using assessment centre technology?
10. Why assessment centres so successful?
11. How is validity of assessment centres calculated?
12. What are global trends in the usage of assessment centre?
13. What are some global practices in the area of assessment centre?

Why are Assessment Centres required?

With globalization, the market has become increasingly demanding and competitive. There is a demand for a range of goods and services. To survive in this competitive environment, organizations need to align their strategic intent in line with the market requirements. The strategic intent thus shapes the mission statement of the organization, the structure of the organization and the values it follows. The organization then sets its performance goals according to its strategic intent. To achieve these performance goals it has become imperative for organizations to have competent people. ACs help organizations identify and develop these competent people and have thus become the need of the day.

History of Assessment Centres

Assessment Centre process was first used sometime between the two world wars. The Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War, prevented Germany from rearming and thus the traditional approach to the selection of officers, which was of observing their performance in war or in exercises was denied to them. German psychologists then devised this method which involved a combination of tests, simulations and exercises to identify the potential of officer candidates. The British Army used this methodology in the early days of Second World War when they established the War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs), again for the selection of officer candidates. However, it was brought into the private sector only in 1956 after AT&T used it for selection of high potentials for managerial positions.

**Definitions of
Assessment Centres
given by
practitioners,
consultants and
academicians**

1. Assessment Centres are often described as the variety of testing techniques that allow the candidates to demonstrate, under standardized conditions, the skills and abilities most essential for success in a given job. – *Dennis A. Joiner, 'Assessment centre in public sector: A practical approach', Public Personnel Management Journal.*
2. An assessment center is a comprehensive standardized procedure in which multiple assessment techniques such as situational exercises and job simulation (business games, discussions, reports & presentations) are used to evaluate individual employee for variety of manpower decisions.
3. An Assessment Centre consists of a standardized evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs. Several trained observers and techniques are used. Judgements about behavior are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations. These judgements are pooled in a meeting among the assessors or by statistical integration process. In an integration discussion, comprehensive accounts of behavior, and often rating of it, are pooled. The discussion results in evaluation of performance of the assesseees on the dimensions/competencies or other variables that the assessment centre is designed to measure. Statistical combination methods should be validated in accordance with professionally accepted standards. - *'Guidelines and ethical considerations for assessment centre operations.'* - 28th *International Congress on Assessment Centre Methods*
4. The main feature of assessment centres is that they are a multiple assessment process. There are five main ways in which that is so. A *group of participants* takes part in a *variety of exercises* observed by a *team of trained assessors* who evaluate each participant against a *number of predetermined, job related behaviors*. Decisions are then made by *pooling shared data*. – *Iain Ballantyne and Nigel Povah*
5. Assessment centres are tools that involve assembling “recommended managerial candidates for specific purpose of assessing their potential and arriving at the decisions about their promotability.” Companies take a group of up to a dozen candidates away from work environment for several days, giving these candidates simulated management problems such

- as a case study, role plays and in-baskets. After a series of interviews and tests, observers (usually industrial psychologists or senior managers) collate the results to produce overall potential ratings for each candidate. – *“Talent Management in an International Company”, Corporate Leadership Council*
6. An assessment centre is a process in which individuals participate in a series of exercises, most of which approximate what they would be called upon to do in the future job. Assessors usually selected from higher management levels in the firm, are trained to observe the participants and evaluate their performance as fairly and impartially as possible. – *‘Can assessment centres be used to improve the salesperson selection process’, E. James Randall, Ernest E. Cooke, Richard J. Jefferies, Journal of personal selling and sales management*
 7. A typical assessment centre requires participants to complete several simulations that test two or more performance dimensions. Job analysis is used to develop both the simulations and the performance dimensions to ensure their job-relatedness. Assessors observe the behavior of the participants, and ultimately pool their observations, evaluate the behaviors, and provide a score for related performance dimensions. – *‘Assessment Centre: Reducing inter assessor influence’, Phillip E. Lowry, Public Personnel Management*
 8. An assessment centre is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional approach designed to provide reliable and valid information about a range of competencies of an individual considered to be necessary for successful performance at a target level in a specific job. – *‘360 degree feedback, competency mapping and assessment centres’, Radha R. Sharma*
 9. Assessment centres are means of helping an organization to identify the strengths and potential development areas of its staff in relation to a particular job or role. – *Beacon consultants, ‘Assessment centres’*
 10. Assessment centre is a method of predicting future performance by using simulations and other techniques to measure a candidate’s ability to handle future responsibilities. – *Julie Hay, ‘Assessment and Development centre’.*
 11. TMTC definition of AC: AC is an integrated standardized process in which a series of exercises are used to assess

people on pre-defined parameters. These pre-defined parameters define job success in a given organizational context. Most of the exercises are simulation of job activities/work challenges that the candidate is expected to perform in the next level role/job.

The table below presents a brief summary of the various definitions of assessment centres.

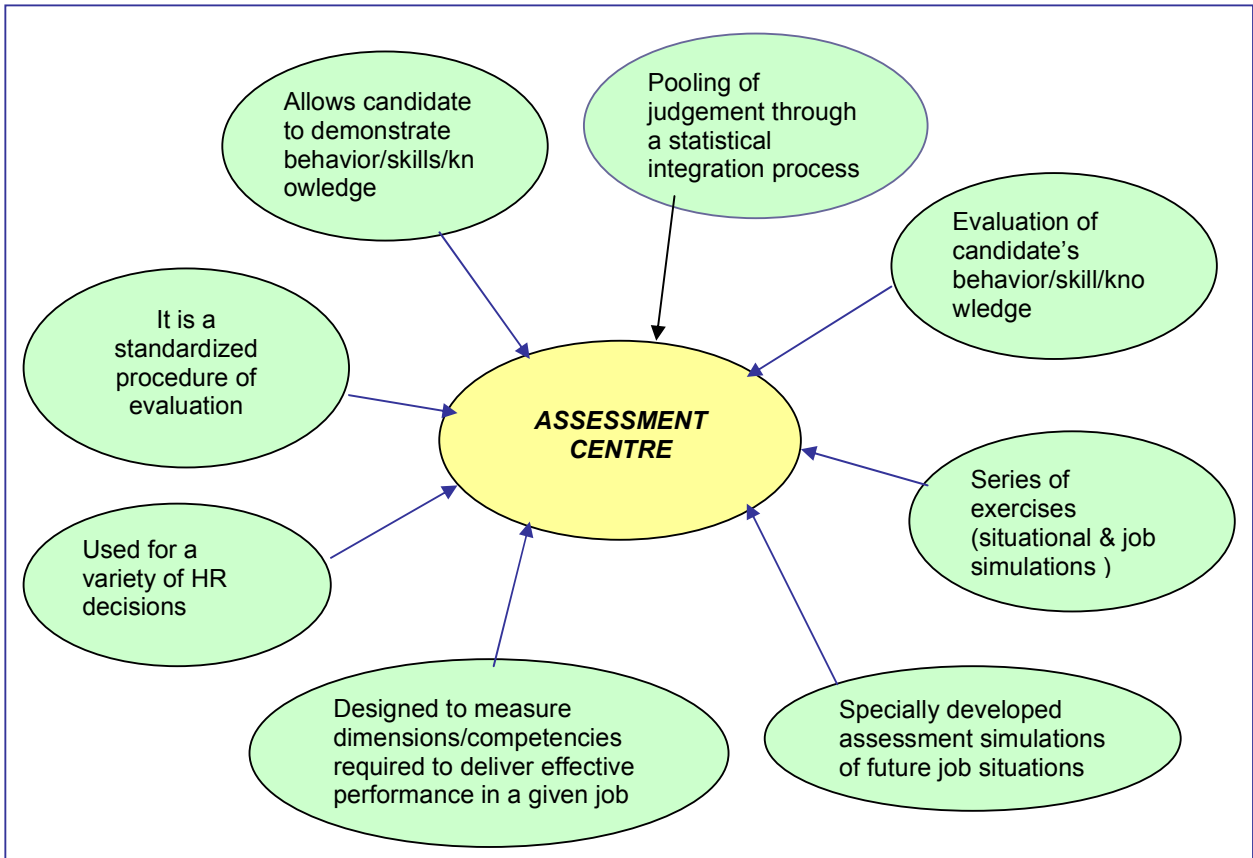


Table 1.0 : A BRIEF SUMMARY OF VARIOUS DEFINITIONS

What can be called an assessment centre?

Assessment Centres consist of many multiples

- **Multiple competencies** to be evaluated for in a candidate.
- **Multiple observers** to eliminate the subjectivity & increase objectivity involved in the process.
- **Multiple participants** :18 – 21 in case of TMTC
- **Multiple exercises** : Exercises like role plays, case analysis, presentations, group discussions etc
- **Multiple simulations**: These could be creative, crisis or exploitative type simulations.
- **Multiple observations**: Each observation is observed atleast twice.

What cannot be called an Assessment Centre?

1. Assessment procedures that do not require the participant to demonstrate overt behavioral responses are not behavioral simulations
2. Panel interviews or a series of sequential interviews as the sole technique.
3. Reliance on a single technique (regardless of whether it is a simulation) as the sole basis for evaluation. However, a single comprehensive assessment technique that includes distinct job-related segments (e.g., large, complex simulations or virtual assessment centers with several definable components and with multiple opportunities for observations in different situations) can be called as an assessment centre exercise.
4. Single-assessor evaluation
5. Using only a test battery composed of a number of paper-and-pencil measures, regardless of whether the judgments are made by a statistical or judgmental pooling of scores.
6. The use of several simulations with more than one assessor but with no pooling of data.

Essential Elements of an AC

Assessment centres must meet the following given criteria:

1. **Job Analysis** – To understand job challenges and the competencies required for successful execution of the job.
2. **Predefine competencies** - Modeling the competencies, which will be tested during the process.
3. **Behavioral classification** - Behaviors displayed by participants must be classified into meaningful and relevant categories such as dimensions, attributes, characteristics, aptitudes, qualities, skills, abilities, competencies, and knowledge.
4. **Assessment techniques** – These include a number of exercises to test the assessee's potentials. Each competency is tested through atleast 2 exercises for gathering adequate evidence for the presence of particular competence.
5. **Simulations** – The exercises should simulate the job responsibilities as closely as possible to eliminate potential errors in selection.
6. **Observations** – Accurate and unbiased observation is the most critical aspect of an AC.

7. **Observers** – Multiple observers are used to eliminate subjectivity and biases from the process. They are given thorough training in the process prior to participating in the AC.
8. **Recording Behavior** – A systematic procedure of recording must be used by the assessors for future reference. The recording could be in the form of hand written note, behavioral checklist, audio-video recording etc.
9. **Reports** – Each observer must make a detailed report of his observation before going for the discussion of integration of scores.
10. **Data Integration** – The pooling of information from different assessors is done through statistical techniques.

Assessment centres Usage: What for

Various organizations have used the data provided by ACs for a variety of purpose why are listed as below:

1. **Selection** – ACs help organizations in getting the right people in.
2. **Career development** – The identification of the competencies possessed by the individual helps organization decide his career plans.
3. **Potential appraisal** – ACs help organizations identify if the person can handle the challenges offered in the next higher position.
4. **Identification of high potential managers** – This creates a pool of managerial talents & multifunctional managers that would be available across the business group etc.
5. **Succession planning** – Identifying the right individual for critical positions such as CEO, CFO etc is very important for the success of the organization. ACs reduces the risk of such wrong identification.
6. **Allocations of challenging assignments** – ACs provide the organization with the strengths and weaknesses of every participant. This helps the organization in deciding the candidates who would have the necessary abilities to undertake the proposed challenging assignments.
7. **Management development** – ACs provide ample opportunity to its participants to reflect on one's capabilities and to improve by observing others perform in the AC.

8. **Identification of training needs** – Assessment centres provide candidates and organization with concrete data on the improvement areas, which can be utilized, for training.
9. **Identification of a global pool of talented managers** - Adjusting oneself in the global scenario is a critical requirement of some positions in the organization. ACs help organizations to identify such managers.

Stages in a typical AC:

ACs normally involves the following stages. The list of critical responsibilities, at each stage in highlighted in the below given table.

Pre AC	During AC	Post AC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining the objective of AC . • Get approval for AC from the concerned officials. • Conduct job analysis. • Define the competencies required for the target position. • Identify the potential position holder and send them invitations. • Identify the observers. • Train the observers. • Design the AC exercises • Decide the rating methodology. • Make infrastructural arrangements. • Schedule the AC. • Inform the concerned people of the schedule. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain participants the purpose of the AC, the procedure it would follow and its outcome. • Give instructions to the participants, before every exercise. • Distribute the competency-exercise matrix sheets among observers. • Conduct all exercises. • Conduct a discussion of all observers on every participant's ratings, at the end of the session. • Make a report of the strengths and improvement areas of every participant. • Give feedback to participants. <p>Get feedback from participants and observers about the conduction of AC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile reports of all participants and submit the list of selected participants to the concerned authorities. • Make improvements in the design according to the recommendations. • Evaluate the validity of results after a definite period.



Exercises in Assessment Centres:

Following are the most widely used exercises in ACs. Every exercise unveils presence/absence of certain competency in the participant. The competencies that are normally evaluated through these different exercises are mentioned in column three.

Tool	Explanation	Competency
Case study interview	Requires candidates to read a large set of information and then answer questions relating to the subject matter	Analytical skills, assimilation of information, prioritization of information, time-management, working under pressure
Competency-based interview	Includes personal history questions and problem-solving tasks and scenarios	Analytical skills, business acumen, communication, interpersonal skills, personal attributes, teamwork
Fact-finding exercise	Includes research and retrieval of information on a given subject or interaction with the interviewer to obtain further information from them	Communication, professional interaction
Group exercise	Includes problem solving within a committee or team	Personal assertiveness, teamwork, Interpersonal effectiveness, drive for result
In-tray test	Includes prioritizing documents, drafting replies to letters, and delegating important tasks	Time-management, analytical skills, business acumen
Problem-solving task	Includes building a structure with limited materials	Analytical skills, creativity, lateral thinking, resourcefulness
Presentation	Involves a 10 to 15 minute presentation on a pre-determined topic.	Assimilation of information, presentation delivery, working under pressure
Psychometric/Personality/ Aptitude Tests	Includes a personality questionnaire and/or numerical, verbal, and diagrammatic reasoning tests.	Agreeableness, behavioral interaction, conscientiousness, extroversion /introversion, personal assertiveness, teamwork
Role-play exercise	Involves acting-out a business-related situation	Approach to business situations
Written exercise	Involves producing a concise written summary from a collection of documents.	Analytical skills, summarization, written communication

Assessment Centres: Advantages

There are certain reasons why assessment centres are preferred over other methods of selection. Some of them are highlighted below:

- ACs map the next level challenges and simulate them in exercises. This raises the validity of the assessment tool. The old way of evaluating the person based on past performance

does not work many times, as the challenges of the next level are different from the challenges in the existing position.

- Assessment centres not only help the organization in placing the right candidate for the right job/assignment but also helps in developing the participants. When participants see others handling the same exercise differently, it gives them an insight into their own performance thereby raises the credibility of the selection procedure.
- It appeals to the lay person's logic and therefore is regarded as a fair means of assessment by the participants.
- Assessment Centres can be customized for different kinds of jobs, competencies and organizational requirements.
- By involving the line managers in the procedure, assessment centres naturally gain support from them in the management decisions.
- Assessment Centres, even when conducted with selection purpose, do provide training to participants in the process. Also the assessors undergo training in the process which proves helpful for the organization.
- Their validity coefficient is higher than most other techniques used for predicting performance. This is so because it simulates real job challenges and evaluates the candidate on the same.

Assessment Centres: Disadvantages

ACs have some disadvantages though on the long run they prove very useful to organization by saving it the cost of wrong decisions. Some anticipated disadvantages of assessment centre could be as under:

1. ACs are very costly and time consuming.
2. ACs requires highly skilled observers as the observers may bring in their own perceptions and biases while evaluating.
3. Those who receive poor assessment might become demotivated and might lose confidence in their abilities.

Why are Assessment Centres so successful?

It has been observed that ACs are more successful than most other traditional ways of finding the right person for the proposed job. ACs score well, above techniques like interviewing, performance appraisal promotions, aptitude tests etc. The reason for its success is the way it is designed and implemented. The

design and implementation of AC involves the following considerations.

1. Exercises are designed to bring out the specific competencies that are required in the target position.
2. Since the exercises are standardized, the observers evaluate the candidates under relatively constant conditions and are therefore able to make valid comparative judgements.
3. The observers usually do not know the candidates personally and so the personal biases are kept out of place.
4. As the AC is conducted outside the workplace, the internal assessors have ample time to observe the candidate's behavior in the exercise and thereby they get an idea of the candidate's capabilities.
5. The assessment focuses on only the key identified competencies and therefore makes the task easier for assessors.
6. The observers are trained to observe and evaluate the specified competencies. This training reaps its benefits in the normal working circumstances also. The observer become more accurate in their observations about people and they and people around them have increased confidence in their judgement of people-related issues.
7. ACs are reviewed on a regular basis and the designs are modified.
8. A combination of internal and external observer pair helps gain an objective view of the person's potential.
9. ACs are so designed that each observer gets to observe each participant in one of the various situations in which participants are asked to perform. Ideally observers should observe every participant, but not more than once.
10. Comprehensive candidate screening prevents the costs associated with less informed and inaccurate managerial choices.
11. The fairness, equality and transparency that the process offers, appeals to most participant's logic.
12. The candidate gets a clear picture of the job responsibilities and challenges in the target position and therefore can make a much well informed decision of whether he would like to take it up.

13. Since multiple observers accurately record the behavior of candidates in an AC, there is concrete evidence for the results of an AC. These recordings can be later produced in case of any arguments.
14. Candidates see others working in the same situation and therefore gain an insight into their improvement areas.

Validity of Assessment Centres

Studying validity is studying the problem of whether or not a test measures what it purports to measure. Assessment centres have high predictive, face and content validity because of the following reasons –

- a) Designing of ACs is based on job analysis
- b) Observers are extensively trained
- c) Candidates are graded by using ratings of competencies

The construct and criterion validity of assessment centres depends on effective job analysis. If job analysis is properly done then these two validities are also found to be high.

Some methods used for validity assessment of assessment centres are given below:

1. The mean and standard deviation is computed for each cell in the rating matrix. Comparing the means for the same competency dimension measured in different exercises shows whether there is consistency in the rating of the competency. The standard deviations show if assessors are differentiating between participants or giving everyone the same average rating.(i.e if the standard deviation is low) If the standard deviation is very low or very high, it suggests that the exercise is at the wrong level of difficulty for the particular dimension.
2. The mean and standard deviation is computed for the ratings for each exercise averaged across dimensions, and for each dimension, averaged across exercises. The means for the exercises show whether some exercises are performed at higher standards than others – perhaps because they are easier. The standard deviation shows the amount of

differentiation between participants. Likewise, the dimension means will show whether some dimensions gain higher ratings than others, the S.D shows the amount of differentiation between participants for each competency dimension.

3. Validation is also achieved through feedback from participants and observers about the conduction of the programme, the structuring of exercises, their relevance etc.

Global Trends in usage of Assessment Centres

There are certain commonly used ways of conducting an AC and the purposes for which they are conducted. These trends are listed below:

Purpose: Most often ACs are used for developmental purposes rather than selection. When used for selection, it is often for the selection of middle level managers wherein the dual purpose of development is also achieved. This is so because of the cost and time involved in conducting an AC.

Duration: Most ACs are two and a half day long if the purpose is of mere selection. However if the AC is to combine selection with training, it is usually conducted for about five to six days. The duration increases with the increase in the responsibility level of those being assessed.

Group strength: The number of candidates in each group is usually 5-6. Overall, the number of participants in an AC ranges from 12 – 21.

Feedback: Feedback most often is provided orally than in written. Feedback is more frequent in case of developmental ACs for example in training etc. In case of evaluative ACs i.e. selection, feedback is provided at the end of the session.

Tests: In-basket tests are the most successful among all the other AC exercises followed by interviews. Mental ability tests and personality tests are the least effective in predicting the future effectiveness of the candidates.

Method of selection of participants: The candidates selected for ACs are usually the ones recommended by the seniors. Performance appraisal data is also considered for the selection to assessment centres.

Competencies: Most widely used competencies by most organizations are as below:

- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Organizing and planning
- ❖ Decision making
- ❖ Impact
- ❖ Oral & written communication
- ❖ Initiative
- ❖ Energy
- ❖ Behavioral flexibility

Exercises: Most widely used exercises in assessment centres are mentioned below:

- ❖ In-tray exercises
- ❖ Interviews (Panel interviews or interviews where in candidates are asked to interview the assessors)
- ❖ Leaderless group discussions
- ❖ Presentations
- ❖ Business games
- ❖ Paper-pen exercises

Global Practices in Assessment Centres:

This section describes in brief the way few global organizations have used ACs:

1. **Britvic** operates a two-tiered graduate assessment centre recruitment process for its young manager graduate and mature graduate training programmes. The first assessment centre typically involves up to 24 candidates across a general talent pool and tests six key competency areas within the following tests and exercises:

- a) Numerical reasoning tests
- b) One-to-one competency-based interviews
- c) Practical problem-solving task

- d) Two group or discussion exercises
- e) Verbal reasoning tests
- f) Working on exercises with employees currently on the graduate programme

The second assessment centre focuses on specific job types and typically involves between 10 and 12 candidates. The format of the assessment is similar to the first but in addition candidates must give a 15-minute presentation on a pre-determined topic.

2. **KPMG** operates a one-day assessment centre as part of its graduate recruitment process. Candidate assessments include an in-tray exercise where candidates prioritize a large number of documents, a group exercise, a presentation, and a partner interview.
3. **Rolls-Royce's** graduate assessment centres use interviews, psychometric tests, a case study, and offer an opportunity to speak to current graduate trainees at the company. The company also tests applicants' technical knowledge either at the assessment centre or in a final interview.
4. **Unilever** operates a two-tiered graduate assessment centre recruitment process where candidates partake in the following tests and exercises:
 - a) Case study interview
 - b) Competency based interview
 - c) Group discussion/exercise
 - d) Work simulation/in-tray exercise
5. **BP** invites graduate candidates to a 24-hour assessment programme held over two days. The programme consists of the following tests and exercises:
 - a) Group exercises
 - b) Informal discussions
 - c) Interviews
6. U.S. aerospace and defense company **Boeing** operates a Pre-Management Assessment Process (PMAP) ,as a structured process for managerial candidate selection at twelve assessment centres across the U.S. Boeing uses four methods to measure candidates against the following competencies:
 - a) Multi-tasking exercise-Interpretational skills, oral communication, planning and time management, positive work orientation, problem solving, teamwork
 - b) Role-playing exercise-Interpretational skills, oral communication, positive work orientation, problem solving, teamwork
 - c) Structured interview-Basic abilities, planning and time management, problem solving
 - d) Written exercise-Basic abilities, planning and time management

7. A major U.S. consumer products company profiled in past Corporate Leadership Council research uses an assessment centre within its sales function to assess current managers' suitability for promotion as well as for gauging long-term leadership potential amongst managers. Assessment centre exercises measure the following mid-career-specific competencies:
 - a) Managerial teamwork-Role play exercise/task force preparation exercise
 - b) Conflict management- Role play exercise
 - c) Degree of innovation-Task force preparation exercise

8. **SmithKline Beecham Consumer Healthcare** used assessment centres to determine the person-position match. They used structured interviews, case study, scenario discussion and portfolio presentation as a part of the process.

9. **Philips Semiconductors: Leadership Potential Assessment**
Philips Semiconductors relies on explicit leadership competencies to provide a common language for discussing the potential of individual employees by following the steps below:
 - a) **Rank Individuals by Competencies:** Individuals are scored, weighted, and ranked on the following six core competencies:
 - b) **Identify Strengths and Weaknesses:** A core management team uses these competencies to identify strengths and weaknesses of key individuals and to map out a specific development plan.
 - c) **Enroll in Assessment Centers:** Once identified, top potential leaders may participate in a two to three-day program at the assessment center. Participants engage in exercise formats to provide a total picture of their skill sets. Participants are assessed on the following parameters:
 - Ability to develop self and others
 - Solutions-oriented thinker
 - Determination to achieve excellent results
 - Exemplifies strong market focus
 - Inspires commitment
 - Portrays a demand for top performance

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