



Senior Civil Servant Assessment Centres for the Ministry of Defence

Case Study

The Context

The Ministry of Defence is one of the largest government departments, with 86,200 civilian employees (as of January 2010) and an annual budget of around £35 billion.

In common with all departments, the MOD is required to maintain a focus on delivering better value for the taxpayer through higher levels of service and greater efficiency. A keystone in achieving these improvements is the need for effective leadership at the highest level, i.e. the Senior Civil Service. The Cabinet Office requires all Departments to have a systematic process for succession planning into the Senior Civil Service (SCS) and for identifying emerging high potential talent at the grades immediately below. Of the 3000 or so Senior Civil Servants in the UK about 10% are employed by the MOD.

The Challenge

As part of its wider Talent Management initiative, MOD identified the need for a more systematic, rigorous and open process for the promotion of Band B staff to SCS grades. Existing interview approaches were seen as less than fully effective by senior management, and distrusted by candidates as decisions taken in 'smoke-filled room' based on personal networks rather than demonstrated capability and talent.

The MOD had long experience of running assessment centres (ACs) for promotion at lower grades, but only decided to introduce the approach for these most senior grades in 2007. In part, this was because of the perceived difficulty of introducing ACs at this level. Indeed, independent advisors had concluded that it was probably impossible to use the method successfully for SCS promotions. The challenges for introducing assessment centres at this level included:

- Achieving buy-in from the Pay Band 2 SCS who would act as advisors in the design and take on assessor roles
- Demonstrating the increased openness and fairness of the approach to candidates
- Designing an assessment process that would test candidates at the highest levels of public sector leadership, people management, strategic thinking and programme management
- Maintaining consistency with the Professional Skills for Government model of leadership and competency for the SCS



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The Solution

Starting from the tender specification we worked with MOD to plan a 3-stage selection process made up of paper sift, psychometrics and competency-based interview, and 1-day assessment centre.

One unknown variable was the number of applications that would be received in the first year of running the new scheme. A particular risk was that a relatively high proportion of Band B might apply for the SCS given the new approach and promise of greater fairness and openness of assessment. To manage this risk we devised an extended 'Are You Ready for SCS' pack which included personal stories from those recently promoted as 'realistic job previews' together with self-assessment tools that would involve both the potential applicant and their line manager. The aim was to ensure that those who eventually applied had taken stock of their own motivations and skills and discussed these with their manager before proceeding.

Other features of our approach included:

- Extensive consultation with current SCS to storyboard and design the assessment materials and to devise assessment criteria
- Full training of SCS Pay Band 2 assessors in competency-based interviewing, AC assessor skills and feedback
- Written and verbal feedback provided to candidates at every stage of the assessment process, i.e. after the paper sift, after the interview and following the assessment centre
- Collaboration with MOD staff in review and evaluation of the process

Starting in 2008, ACs for 40 candidates per annum were designed, facilitated and reported resulting in the identification of a substantial pool of SCS promotion passport holders.

The Benefits

The MOD has successfully extended the assessment centre approach to promotions at the highest level. In addition to meeting the requirement to build an identified pool of talent ready to take on SCS roles MOD has realised the following benefits:

- A clearly open and fair process that has enabled the progression of candidates from across all parts of the business, not just those most closely aligned with the Whitehall centre
- A more reliable and accurate approach to identifying candidates with the necessary generalisable skills in leadership, people management and strategic thinking, among other competencies
- Wide engagement by the most senior SCS in the Department with the criteria by which the next generation of SCS must be selected
- Greater involvement of SCS line managers and MOD Skills Champions in the identification and development of talent