

Guide to assessment

Arctic roles

Whether it be helping a polar expedition team to co-operate or improving retention among bus drivers, tests can deliver impressive results

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No company would dispute the importance of finding the right person for the right job. But many expend far more time, money and effort on forcing square pegs into round holes than they do on ensuring the right fit between candidate, role, team and culture at the outset.

This costs them dear. Poor selection and management of their people costs UK companies on average £1,000 per employee, a study from business psychologists SHL and The Future Foundation estimates. That adds up to around £20 million a year for a FTSE company employing 20,000 people, and costs the UK as a whole an annual £12 billion.

To better gauge candidates' suitability for a given role, a growing number of organisations are now turning to assessment tools such as psychometric tests, which, according to research from the British Psychological Society, can help companies reduce their recruitment costs by 70 per cent.

We talked to four different companies about the role that assessment plays in their recruitment, assessment and development processes.

TMSDI tool optimises teamwork for polar quest

Sean Chapple knows a lot about teamwork. A captain in the Royal Marines, he has been leading expeditions for the past 20 years. His exploits include an ascent of Mount Kenya, the Grand Canyon Iron Man Challenge and a circumnavigation of the principal East African states - not to mention polar expeditions.

But his biggest challenge came last year when he led two different teams to the North and the South Poles. In March he took an eight-man team to the Magnetic North Pole, skiing 300 miles in 30 days, and in November he took a six-man team to and from the geographic South Pole - a 1,400-mile, 72-day trek.

As if that weren't enough, Chapple chose teams with little or no experience of cold weather. He began his recruitment drive for the Polar Quest expeditions among the armed forces in November 2005, and whittled down more than 400 applicants to 21 who would go

through training. “I had to allow for some fall-out before we actually set off,” he recalls.

Because leadership and teamwork would be as important as physical fitness and endurance, everyone completed an intensive team development programme using a tool called Team Management Profile (TMP) from TMS Development International (TMSDI).

“Individuals completed a questionnaire that resulted in a 4,000-word profile detailing their preferred approach to decision-making, tasks, communication and relationships,” says Chapple. “From that they were classified broadly as organisers, advisers, explorers or controllers, and within that as one of eight different personality types, all of which was represented on a coloured wheel.”

The insight the tool provided was invaluable to teambuilding before the expeditions, and to sustaining teamwork while on the ice, says Chapple. “When I was recruiting I was looking for people who would be on the right-hand side of the wheel - the explorers and organisers who, when they were in Arctic temperatures of minus 40 degrees, with an ever-evolving plan, would be flexible and able to change. But in planning the exercise I needed people who were on the left-hand side of the wheel - the advisers and organisers who would look at the detail and identify potential problems,” he explains.

“When everyone had done their TMPs, we realised that we had gaps on the left side of the wheel. But we were able to compensate for them by consciously reviewing all our decisions through the left-hand lens.”

Once on the ice, the teams always ensured that decisions they made were balanced by seeking opinions from different sides of the wheel. Chapple recalls: “I’m an assessor/developer, so I would assess our progress, whether we had enough fuel and rations, and every evening I would formulate a plan for the next day. I would then hand it to another member of the team who was a concluder/producer, and he would look at it in detail and tweak it where necessary, before passing it on to two thruster/organisers who looked at it from a practical perspective. For example, I realised at one point that we would have to reduce our breakfast ration to 100g to make the food last longer; the concluder/producer asked how we could best measure it out; and the thruster/organiser worked out a solution.”

Just as important was sharing leadership. Thanks to their in-depth understanding of each other, leadership shifted around different members of the team during the expeditions. This took the pressure off Chapple and played to individuals’ strengths at particular times.

TMSDI initially approached Chapple after the press launch of the Polar Quest. He tested out its claims for TMP with the Royal Navy Fleet headquarters, which was already using it as part of its induction. “And when I did a TMP myself, my wife said it had me down to a tee. I was sold,” he says.

The success of both expeditions is testament to the TMP’s effectiveness. Chapple and his party were the first military team to make a return overland journey to the South Pole - something that only 11 other people had ever achieved. “And despite the intense pressure, we did it with no arguments, because we had developed such respect for our individual differences,” he says.