

## **22. Department of Psychology**

### **Occupational psychologist at assessment and consultancy unit**

#### **The Organisation:**

I worked within the Assessment and Consultancy Unit (ACU) at a government office. The Unit was a team of Occupational Psychologists. ACU was one of several teams that formed the Leadership and Learning Directorate (LALD). Together with three other directorates, LALD is a part of the Human Resources (HR) Directorate.

ACU develops, administers and analyses assessments for individuals as well as teams. Assessments are used for recruitment purposes as well as the development of existing office staff. For example, trained members of the team carry out assessments of individuals that have been short-listed for appointment to Senior Civil Servants (SCS) posts. Reports are then compiled based on the assessments and are subsequently used by interview boards to provide additional information that can be incorporated into the interview panel's questions and final decision.

Other projects the Unit is involved in include "Talent Management", ensuring diversity in selection and the Core Skills Assessment (CSA). Briefly, Talent Management focuses on the existing employees of an organisation. The aim is to ensure that these employees are being as efficient as they can in the posts they hold. This is a continuous process and the focus is essentially to better current employees' performance and exploring development techniques.

ACU strives to employ as diverse a work force as possible without sacrificing the abilities required by the roles to be filled. In line with the equal opportunities policy, ACU works to assess candidates in a fair manner that does not discriminate in any way. Candidates should only be differentiated on the basis of ability to do the job, rather than any other factors.

#### **Tasks performed:**

##### **Intensive Development Programme (IDP)/ New Leaders Programme (NLP) Selection Centre**

In December, I helped design an oral briefing exercise that candidates applying to join the IDP/ NLP would complete as part of their assessment. This particular exercise was aimed to test three competencies: initiative and openness, oral communications skills and interpersonal skills and managing relationships. I was required to propose a scenario that would test the three competencies. To assist me with the task, I was provided with two similar exercises that had been used in previous years. I also had access to the Assessment Centre Skills Manual and received assistance from my supervisor.

Apart from the exercise itself, I also had to develop marking guidelines for the assessors. Essentially, a colleague and I had to ensure that there was a candidate pack and an assessor pack for this exercise. The packs included the instructions for candidates and the exercise brief outlining the task and all the relevant materials (a description of the company and a newspaper article). In addition, the assessor pack included the competencies that were being measured through the exercises and other relevant sections that would help the assessors mark the oral briefing exercise. In addition, the evaluation form for assessors to be completing whilst the candidate was being interviewed was also included.

All the exercises to be used for the assessment centre were piloted, and all changes were made accordingly. The next stage involved an assessor meeting to which I was invited to. It was very interesting to see how assessors prepared for the assessment centre. The assessors were provided with time to read and examine each exercise. In addition, they worked in groups to ensure that they had the same understanding of the competencies that were being tested for. Following each exercise, the senior assessor gave feedback on the marking criteria and answered any questions that the assessors had. This was a good opportunity for me to better understand the competencies and the whole process that the candidates were going through.

I really learned a lot about what is involved in setting up and running an assessment centre. Six candidates were scheduled on each day that I helped facilitate the centre. Taking on a facilitator role enabled me to develop my organisational and team-working abilities. The lead facilitator guided me and the other facilitators and we all worked as a team and with the assessors also to ensure that the assessment process was as pleasant an experience for the candidates as possible.

I was invited to attend the summary meeting of the selection centre. This meeting was an opportunity to evaluate the centre. The main aim of the meeting was to decide on the pass mark.

It was really useful to attend this meeting as it was the final stage of the centre. I really enjoyed seeing the centre through from beginning to end. I now have a much better understanding of the requirements that need to be met by candidates that are successful for this programme. It is a very thorough process. Approximately 25% of candidates invited to the centre were successful.

### **Evaluation of placement in utilising or extending skills and knowledge:**

#### **Skills:**

Organisational: My placement has really helped to improve my organisational skills. In most instances, I would have several tasks to be working on and therefore needed to ensure that I could prioritise and work efficiently. Use of "to do lists," the "Tasks" tool and calendar in MS Outlook were some of the methods I used to keep organised.

My organisational skills were also developed as I would, at times be required to set my own deadlines. This, I found, needed discipline. During the course of the placement year, I carried out a number of literature reviews. Typically, I was given the freedom to set myself a timeframe in which to work on these reviews. Initially, I found that I spent too long conducting this work and was reluctant to seek feedback. With time, I learned that I needed to plan a better, more organised approach to literature review tasks.

I had to apply organisational skills particularly when assisting with workshops or assessment day preparations. These tasks extended my organisation skills as they demanded various skills to be used simultaneously. Generally, tasks included contacting candidates via phone or email and ensuring the pre-workshop documents to be completed by candidates were submitted by the deadline, ordering and collecting the necessary materials, compiling workbooks, setting up assessment rooms, arranging visitor passes and the construction of assessors' and candidates' timetables. Some of these tasks occurred at the same time, for example, I was to ensure that I

had collected all the necessary information from a candidate during a phone conversation with them in order for me to know whether or not they would need a visitor pass. I therefore, prior to making the phone call ensured that I listed everything I need to cover in the conversation.

**Interpersonal:** Prior to the placement, I was unsure about the format and writing of professional emails. Within a short-time I was able to develop this skill as it was something I had to do on a regular basis. I have found that this skill has not only helped in the work setting but has generally helped me to adapt the way I write correspondence.

My interpersonal skills were further developed at assessment centres as I interacted with many different people. The thought of meeting colleagues, especially those in more senior roles was unnerving at the start of my placement. However, these feelings subsided as I had interacted with senior employees in previous employment. With time, I found that I could also interact confidently with senior members of staff. Fortnightly team meetings whereby every member of the team briefly outlined what they were working on is something that also aided the development of my interpersonal skills.

As in previous employment, I used the phone to communicate with a wide range of people. When necessary, I took phone messages for members of ACU when they were away from their workstation. Good interpersonal skills were vital as the message had to be accurate and passed onto the relevant recipient at the earliest opportunity.

As mentioned, I worked closely with some members of ACU on several projects such as the development of exercises to be used at an assessment centre. This type of working style not only allowed me to improve the way I conveyed my ideas to others, but also helped build a good working relationship so that I can approach the individuals in question on matters other than our project that I may need feedback on or assistance with.

**Knowledge:** I have gained a great deal of knowledge about the field of occupational psychology. I now have a good understanding of how some occupational psychologists use their knowledge to help individuals with areas at work. I appreciate that the type of work occupational psychologists undertake does vary somewhat. Tools such as the MBTI, EBW as well as one-to-one meetings help to develop individuals in the workplace. However, the results and feedback obtained from the use of most tools can be utilised in other settings.

I can see that occupational psychologists' work can impact the individual and teams alike. My observations at workshops highlighted the development needs that the individual may have, regardless of position within an organisation. Delegates walked away from development workshops feeling pleased with what they had achieved. Such programmes involved a lot of interaction on their part in order for them to fully engage with behaviours that they may need to adopt to aid their performance in the workplace.

I can also appreciate the importance of good team-working. I recall back to one workshop in which delegates were asked to take on the role of a senior member of staff with a difficult personality, and later, the role of an employee assigned to approach a "difficult", and more senior employee. As well as observing some of the role plays, I was asked to take on the role of a difficult member of staff. With guidance from my supervisor and the cues each role-player received, I played out the character. The delegates took well to the roles and felt better equipped to deal with a similar situation if it were to arise in their office. In playing the role of the

“difficult” senior employee, they could reflect on what characteristics and behaviours someone, possibly themselves in the future, ought to really exhibit.

My confidence has also benefited as a result of the placement. I was given a lot of independence and found this encouraged me to be more confident. In line with this, my interpersonal skills also improved during the course of the year as my work often involved interaction with my different people across the organisation.

In all, the placement was an invaluable experience. I learned a great deal, some of which may not have otherwise been possible to attain without a placement year at this stage. I really enjoyed my time with ACU and feel encouraged to pursue a career in occupational psychology.

### **Evaluations of personal change and development:**

The placement has developed me in various ways. It has given me a real insight to the world of work. I felt very much a part of ACU and was given the support I needed when it was required. I can apply much of what I learned with ACU not just to my future career but in other areas of my life. I also feel that the year has given me the grounding I need to face the final year of my degree and future studies I may pursue. Every member of ACU had successfully completed their psychology undergraduate degree and encouraged. The grades of members of ACU ranged from Psychologists with a Masters Qualification to the Senior Occupational Psychologist.

Shadowing various interviews and facilitating assessments opened my eyes to the standards that are deemed necessary to be successful. I have come across many competencies and understand why they are assessed for at different assessment centres. In some cases, competencies revealed to me a development need I need to work on.

Although I had been in employment prior to the placement, the experience developed me even further. For example, the working hours and the hours I worked were nothing like I had experienced before. I had to adapt very quickly to my new schedule. I had greater responsibilities than those at previous jobs such as the importance of keeping information and documents strictly confidential.