

SWISS⁺ assessment

***Quality standards set by Swiss Assessment for the
development, implementation and evaluation
of assessment centers***

Swiss Assessment owns the copyright for these standards

Preliminary note

- The quality standards for the Assessment Center technique were developed in 1992 by the Working Group Assessment Center Germany. The aim was to formulate a common understanding of the term assessment center (AC) and to provide specific information on the design, implementation and quality control of ACs. At the same time, there was an intention to highlight potential misleading or wrong developments. In the following ten years, the implementation of ACs within German-speaking countries rose significantly; the period was further defined by a number of incisive developments, innovations such as the Internet or constraints such as increasing cost pressure. As a consequence, from 2002 onwards a working group was set up to work again on the standards. The reviewed version was adopted in February 2004 by the overall working group and published after an editorial revision.
- The standards of the Assessment Center technique of the Working Group Assessment Center Germany are based on a fundamental discourse of the essential aspects, taking into account both practical and academic considerations. In Spring 2007, the standards were reviewed by members of the Working Group Assessment Center Switzerland (now called Swiss Assessment). The revision focused mainly on the question to what extent the standards would have to be adapted to typical Swiss circumstances. The working group concluded that no fundamental changes were necessary. Only a few adjustments were made to accommodate for Swiss language conventions.
- The following content was therefore adopted with the consent of the authors of the Working Group Assessment Center Germany. They are also accordingly applicable for individual assessments and, in principle, can also be used if only single procedures are deployed for the selection or development of personnel

Aims of the standards

- To create a contemporary basis for appropriate AC practice
- To review the quality of offers for business practice and, as a result, to identify unqualified proposals
- To enable transparency and clarity for decision-makers, users and practitioners
- To further increase the acceptance of the Assessment Center method

Structure of the standards

A total of nine standards were established, which are basically tied to the practical application of the AC design and implementation methods. In the following illustration, a core principle is specified for each standard, outlining the content of the respective standard; its benefits are shown in the text below. Subsequently, information is provided for the actual implementation of the standard.

The section "Violations" illustrates actual procedures which violate the respective standard. This list of exclusions highlights unacceptable behaviours.

Swiss Assessment defines 9 standards

- Standard 1: Order clarification and integration
- Standard 2: Work and requirements analysis
- Standard 3: Variety of exercises
- Standard 4: Observation and evaluation
- Standard 5: Selection and training of observers
- Standard 6: Pre-selection and information to participants
- Standard 7: Preparation and implementation
- Standard 8: Feedback and follow-up
- Standard 9: Evaluation

Standard 1: Order clarification and integration

- The goals and framework conditions of the contract as well as the consequences for the participants must be clarified and made binding ahead of the development and implementation of an AC.

Benefits

- Often, a wrong attitude is displayed, along the lines of: "Let's develop an AC, many aspects will clear themselves as we go along." However, any benefits are lost when resistance builds up among participants or stakeholders, e.g. if young talents perceive it as a punishment or if middle managers fear to be disempowered, having been able to make their own staffing decisions up to that point in time.
- The desired benefits can only be reaped through a suitable implementation strategy. Clarifying a situation can also lead to the decision to completely dispense with an AC.

Implementation

- Clarifying the request from the company, e.g. achieving a stronger retention of important employees, reducing the risk of area-centric bias or centralised screening processes of potential candidates.
- Who is the internal customer of the order? How can it be ensured that the decision-makers of the organisation stand behind this order?
- What influence is the AC expected to have on the culture of the organisation, what is the message to the organisation?
- Definition of necessary framework data: aims, resources, budget, timeframe for the implementation.
- What is the overall process in which the AC is integrated, e.g. how is the AC weighed against the opinion of the direct manager, what are the consequences for the participants?
- With an AC for internal selection, there will always be losers; how is this problem going to be dealt with?
- What measures should follow the AC? What happens to the data? What is the validity of an AC result? What measures are planned in terms of staffing decisions or employee support?

Violations

- Deceptions: these can take the shape of employee support through "information workshops", which are actually meant to screen and select individuals, or of "ACs for internal selection", which are designed in such a way that no actual selection takes place.
- Introducing ACs without involving HR in processes and instruments.
- Unclear positioning of the line managers' role, which will slightly change, with regards to the selection of team leaders.
- Delegating each step of the process to an internal or external consultant, without securing the commitment of the organisation to implement the results.
- Excessive order clarification and integration ("We ask everybody, we involve everybody").

- A suitability assessment can only be meaningful through a precise analysis of the specific requirements

Benefits

- The assessment center examines whether there is a match between the individual and the professional role. A work and requirement analysis for the specific role must therefore be carried out ahead of a personal diagnostic.
- The outcome of this phase is the definition of a requirement profile, summarising the aspects which are critical to be successful in the role. The detailed information collected during the analysis describes the target position and also serves as a basis for the subsequent steps in the design of the assessment center.

Implementation

The work and requirements analysis:

- records professional situations which are relevant from a suitability point of view, as well as various successful behaviours which can be observed in such situations
- surveys knowledge in specific fields, skills, abilities and other relevant personal characteristics required to be successful in the role
- sets minimum standards for successfully coping with critical situations.
- In order to preferably capture all relevant aspects, the analysis is based on a well-grounded selection of analysis methods with different conceptual approaches, perspectives and personas

The following framework conditions must be taken into account:

- The reference point for the analysis is the specific role in the specific company.
- The groups of people who are significantly engaged at the actual target level are involved in the process (decision-makers, incumbents).
- Defined corporate goals as well as existing concepts for staffing and personnel development, specific to the organisation, are integrated in the process.
- In addition to current requirements, future requirements will be specified and taken into account, if necessary

Violations

- No work and requirements analysis is carried out
- Simple transfer of existing requirements from other target groups or of existing lists of requirements from external consultants or other companies
- Collecting generic names of characteristics without specifying the content
- Collecting only past or only visionary criteria in a one-sided approach
- No specific requirement analysis is carried out, favouring a generic list of capability characteristics
- Only a work and requirements analysis is carried out, which is biased towards one-sided diagnostic procedures (only tests, only simulations)

Standard 3: Variety of exercises

- **An assessment center consists of work simulations**

Benefits

- Whether a certain behaviour is suitable or not is determined, among other things, by the framework conditions of the tasks.
- Therefore, behaviour can only be realistically observed and assessed in a situational context.
- In order to be able to make a prediction about the suitability of an applicant for a specific target role, the tasks and work situations must be reproduced as realistically as possible.
- The AC exercises simulate work situations which determine the success or failure of a target role holder in their day-to-day work.

Implementation

- All procedures used must be based on the outcomes of the work and requirements analysis. They must cover a wide range of observable behaviours critical to success and allow multiple observation opportunities for each requirement.
- At least three different work situations must be simulated in an AC.
- Exercise materials and instructions for participants must be explained in detail so that they clarify the aims and expected results of the exercise and provide participants with clear information about the activities.
- Every requirement must be recorded in at least two exercises (redundancy rule).
- Clear instructions must be provided where role players are being used, so as to ensure a standardised level of difficulty as well as to enable an appropriate interaction with the candidate. In addition, the role players prepare for their assignment in a training session.
- Non-simulation exercises, such as tests and interviews, are only included in an AC if the requirements cannot be adequately recorded through simulations.
- Before being actually implemented in an AC, all newly developed exercises are reviewed for their suitability in practical test runs with suitable individuals.

Violations

- Using exercises which do not reflect the requirements of the target position (e.g. NASA exercise, survival training, etc.) or using statements of opinion as behaviour samples
- Implementing tests, computer simulations, pre-existing or newly purchased AC exercises without due consideration
- Overemphasising specific exercise types for economic reasons (e.g. group discussions)
- Use of methods in which the simulation can only be imagined
- Specification of an observation feature which cannot be sufficiently observed during the exercise
- Instructions for participants include behavioural instructions. The simulation becomes an instruction.

- The diagnosis for suitability is based on a systematic behavioural observation

Benefits

- An assessment center is characterised by the predominant use of work simulations.
- The recorded behaviour of the participant during these simulations forms the central database in which observers exchange their impressions and conclusions.
- The documented observations constitute a significant decision-making basis to diagnose the suitability and to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the respective participant.
- In order to ensure reliable and valid assessments, the use of a requirements-based observation system is mandatory.

Implementation

- The observation must be made based on requirements. The requirements are specified for each exercise through operationalisations.
- The observation system must coherently regulate the connection between the observation and the evaluation phase. Regular documentation of the observation and of the evaluation must be ensured.
- Assignment plans clearly regulate which requirements are recorded in which exercise through a requirement-exercise matrix and which participants are recorded by which observers through an observers' rotation plan.
- Each participant's behaviour is independently recorded in each exercise by at least two observers. Each requirement must be observed in at least two exercises
- In order to avoid judgment errors caused by overload and complexity, a maximum of five requirements are recorded in each exercise, ideally only three.
- Each observer makes an independent assessment based on their observations immediately after each exercise.
- The data contributing to the overall outcome is integrated promptly after the AC
- The data is merged following a procedure which has been clearly defined ahead of the AC and which is equally applied to all participants.

Violations

- Abstract phrases are used instead of concrete operationalisations; there are no behavioural references
- Use of ambiguous assessment systems, without a regulated observation and evaluation process
- The evaluation takes place separately from the observation, by formulating undifferentiated, generic judgments (e.g. "good", "bad").
- Individual judgments of the observers are distorted due to exchange of information or undue influence
- The participants are assessed at different levels of detail
- The performance of the other AC participants is used as a point of reference for the evaluation of an AC participant.

Standard 5: Selection and training of observers

- **Well-prepared observers who appropriately represent the company are best suited to make informed and accurate decisions**

Benefits

- Anyone acting as an observer with decision-making power about the professional career of others as part of an assessment center must have sufficient knowledge of the target role, of the selection process and of its application.
- Comprehensive training for observers is an indispensable part of an AC.
- It must enable observers to make valid diagnoses and informed decisions. Observers know and consider the opportunities, risks and possible sources of error contained in the procedure.
- Selection and training of the observers are important factors which influence the acceptance of an AC and of the resulting decisions made by all stakeholders.

Implementation

- The observers from the subject area work at least at one level above the target role.
- When assembling the group of observers, it is important to ensure that the individuals can represent the company appropriately, in terms of business experience and professional background with regard to the target role.
- Depending on company policy and needs, external consultants may complement the observer teams.
- A balanced mix of experienced and new observers is recommended.
- First-time observers must attend a training session ahead of their first AC, covering the following content:
 - Information on the concept of the diagnosis of suitability
 - Description of the procedures used
 - Illustration of the requirement criteria and target role
 - Illustration and training of the observation and evaluation process
 - Training on the rationale behind the separation of observation and evaluation
 - Sources of error in the observation and evaluation process
 - Illustration of the contents, aims and procedures of the observers' meeting
 - Training for the feedback session
 - Reflection on the responsibilities and impact of the observer's role
- Follow-up training sessions are required if the content of the AC changes, if new target groups are being covered or if there are large gaps between the assignments of an observer.

Violations

- A trained observer asks an unsuitable colleague to represent them
- An observer is assigned to the AC against their will
- Assigning an insufficiently trained observer for their first AC
- Management trainees are mostly chosen by external stakeholders or administrative assistants
- For internal procedures: the observer is the direct manager of the participant.

- **Systematic pre-selection as well as transparent and timely information are the basis for the economic and personal success in the AC**

Benefits

- Pre-selection and preparation are essential factors which influence the acceptance of an AC by the stakeholders. Selection criteria for participation in the AC must be communicated openly ahead of the event and then rigorously applied.
- Potential participants must be informed about the basic aims, the procedure, the opportunities and the risks involved in the procedure.
- Additional information about the individual exercises as well as useful preparation strategies are provided in order to balance out different knowledge backgrounds between the participants and to enable them to gain experience with the circumstances of the AC.
- All measures are also geared to ease the difficulty for those losing out.

Implementation

- Participation can be linked to formal criteria that are as meaningful as possible in terms of suitability diagnostics (e.g. roles to be reviewed beforehand, preparatory workshops to be completed ahead of the event, etc.).
- In principle, all well-founded aptitude diagnostic methods such as test procedures, pre-interviews, etc. can be used as a pre-selection procedure, but only if they are linked to the pre-identified requirements of the target role.
- Only candidates with realistic chances of success shall take part in an AC.
- The advance information sent to participants should ideally be standardised, e.g. by preparing a written documentation, to ensure that all participants receive the same level of information.
- Where possible, the line manager involved should support the preparation for the AC. This includes competence-oriented coaching, for example on how to run presentations, and is clearly differentiated from any strategic deception, i.e. rehearsing specific behaviours for a role.

Violations

- The pre-selection process is arbitrary and does not follow a system.
- The direct manager makes nominations without sticking to the specified criteria, e.g. falsely praising unpleasant employees in order to get rid of them, intentionally omitting top performers, nominating the best subject specialists for management positions, etc.
- Managers only nominate employees to avoid giving critical feedback to their direct reports.
- Self-nominated participants receive no help to prepare and are therefore left at a disadvantage.
- Information about the aims are either incorrect or missing, e.g. it is presented as a selection process instead of a development AC; the same applies to the opportunities and risks involved.
- No clear targets are specified for the individual exercises, or the observation categories are not disclosed.

- **Good planning and moderation of the AC ensure a transparent and targeted process**

Benefits

- The assessment center is a complex and dynamic process, its sequences must be regulated in a clear and transparent manner.
- The moderation and suitable organisational support ensure that everyone involved can fully concentrate on their task at hand.
- The professional planning and implementation of the AC form a basis for fairness and respect for all stakeholders.

Implementation

- Complete the planning of meetings, rooms and stakeholders in a timely manner
- Identify premises that ensure an undisturbed and confidential process
- Create a differentiated and clear schedule for all stakeholders
- Set up a comparable sequence of exercises for all participants, to avoid distorted perceptions
- Only let suitable and trained individuals perform the role plays
- Observe the timings and assessment standards; the moderator also runs the observer meeting
- Use qualified moderators
- Keep waiting times for participants as short as possible
- Safeguard the procedure against unwanted disclosure of information, i.e. collect all materials and resources used at the end of each exercise, ask for a declaration of confidentiality
- At the beginning of the AC, provide information about the procedure and applicable rules
- For professional development events, inform the participants about the criteria

Violations

- No responsibility has been assigned for the moderation of the AC
- Assistants or observers are asked to act as moderators
- The instructions for the exercises are read out, instead of controlling the quality of the observation and assessment process
- Participants, observers or role-players are recruited on impulse
- Participants are overwhelmed by unrealistically tight schedules
- The required time for evaluation after each exercise has not been scheduled
- Some of the participants complete an exercise in the morning while others complete the same exercise only late in the afternoon
- The observer meeting is held under considerable time pressure
- The AC takes place in rooms accessible to all.

- **All AC participants have the right to an individual feedback, so that they can understand the outcomes and learn from them. Specific follow-up measures must be derived from the AC and implemented afterwards.**

Benefits

- Only if all AC participants, as part of a detailed feedback process, receive the essential information about their individual outcomes and the behaviours on which the decision is based, is the prerequisite given for the observations to be appreciated in a meaningful manner so that they can further develop their own skills and personality.
- If the feedback is either not provided at all or only provided in an inadequate fashion, then the AC has only a limited potential to develop the full benefit for the company carrying it out.
- High-quality feedback increases the transparency of a process, which leads to a higher level of acceptance among all stakeholders, if the method is flawless.

Implementation

- After an AC event, all participants are offered the opportunity to attend a feedback session within a reasonable period of time. Participants are free to choose whether to accept this offer.
- The feedback is provided face-to-face between the participant and one or two observers.
- The process is supported by suitable materials and is based on specific individual cases
- The feedback of the specific behaviour is based exclusively on observations gathered from the AC exercises and on the outcomes of the observers' meeting. The feedback covers personal strengths and weaknesses in terms of the requirement criteria, as well as specific recommendations for development.
- Decisions derived from the AC results must be coordinated, documented and communicated as soon as possible.
- It is recommended that participants are given written summary of the results
- All stakeholders must comply with the requirements on confidentiality and data protection.
- For internal participants, an individual, concrete action plan will be developed and agreed on after the AC event; the plan will be based on the requirements of the current or future role and its implementation will be regularly reviewed.

Violations

- Some or all participants in the AC are not offered a feedback session.
- The feedback is not behaviour-oriented, includes generic statements or refers to information which is not based on the behaviour shown in the AC exercises.
- Observers are systematically released of their duty to provide feedback by other stakeholders such as moderators, as they provide feedback instead.
- Measures are recommended which are not connected with the participant's profile nor with the target role, e.g. specialists being asked to attend a workshop on management.
- Measures are neither planned nor implemented.

- Regular quality reviews and controls ensure that the goals targeted by the AC are also achieved in a sustainable manner

Benefits

- Each AC represents a significant investment. Especially a newly developed assessment center is initially just a hypothesis building on the relationship between requirement criteria, AC components and reliability criteria in practice.
- The quality review empirically ensures that these relationships are taking place, that the process is constantly improved and, therefore, that the required effort is legitimised.

Implementation

- Mandatory reasons for an empirical quality review are:
 - Initial running of an AC
 - Adaptation of an existing AC to a new target group
 - Adaptation based on to sustainable changes in the organisation
 - Substantial changes in the AC process and/or AC documentation
- Even if a procedure has not been changed, quality tests must be repeated at least every 2 to 5 years. The following aspects are relevant for the evaluation:
 - **Examination of the internal structure of the procedure** (degree of difficulty of the exercises and dimensions, appropriate differentiation of the exercises and dimensions between the participants)
 - **Forecasting quality** (good forecast quality of the potential and suitability statements based on criteria of practical testing, follow-up of recommendations for development from the AC)
 - **Acceptance and fairness** (basic requirement for a long-term implementation of the procedure, positive external impact of the company on external applicants, acceptance of the procedure by participants, observers and other interested parties).

Violations

- A new assessment center is introduced and implemented without reviewing the structure of the procedure
- Confirmation by acceptance or individual feedback only, instead of carrying out empirical quality control
- Quality control is exclusively carried out by the individual or institution who previously developed the AC
- Reliability criteria are selected based on the availability of the data.