

# Growing Talent Through Development Centers

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**W**ith the increasing competition for employees, organizations need to identify and hold on to their talented people more than ever before. This means it is imperative that capable people are constantly challenged to improve their performance levels, while at the same time, being supported along their journey of self-development. Therefore, the role of development centers is an increasingly important component of an organization's talent management strategy. So how can organizations maintain a steady pipeline of talented people within an extremely competitive work environment?

## What are Development Centers?

It is difficult to provide an exact definition of a development center because the context may differ widely depending on the objectives of the program. In simple terms, however, development centers provide an opportunity for participants to benefit from impartial and objective feedback on the behavioral competencies they need at work, leading to a practically focused development action plan. Development centers usually possess the following features:

- Participants are assessed against a clearly defined set of criteria or competencies. The set of behaviors is required for effective (and ideally superior) performance within the target role
- A multi-method approach is employed, with a variety of sources of information and assessment techniques being used. This ensures comprehensive evaluation of an individual's capability, and increases reliability of measurement
- Candidates are examined by a number of different observers. This increases objectivity and impartiality.
- Candidates participate in groups. This enables observation of candidate performance, both on an individual basis and when interacting with others

- The information gathered is integrated. The judgments and recommendations resulting from the development center are based on the behavioral observations of all of the observers

At the end of the process, the observers meet and integrate the information they have gathered according to a highly structured and objective process. They are required to reach consensus evaluations of candidates' strengths and development needs against the competencies for the role, as well as provide an evaluation of their overall performance. Participants will then receive personal feedback during or after the development center process. This is used as the basis for the creation of a personal development action plan.

In summary, the essence of the development center method is characterized by the use of:

- Multiple participants
- A variety of information sources
- A range of different assessors
- A competency model based on an analysis of the job
- A thorough review and integration of evidence by all observers
- Provision of feedback and support to development action planning

## When is a Development Center Not a True Development Center?

Some organizations use the terms development center and assessment center almost interchangeably, which can lead to confusion. The diagram on the next page shows a continuum from a center intended entirely for selection and assessment purposes (a process requiring a "yes/no" answer within a recruitment context) to a pure development center (an initiative that focuses entirely on learning and development).

The Assessment/Development Center Continuum



**A Range of Development Center Options**

**Option 1: The Traditional Development Center**

The traditional development center utilizes a multi-method approach to gain a thorough view of each participant’s strengths and development needs in relation to the competencies assessed. Candidates are required to complete a range of exercises that simulate activities relevant to their working environment. Development centers typically include a combination of:

Integration of Evidence Gathered	
Group exercises	Ability testing
Competency-based interviews	Personality questionnaires
Analytical exercises	Role-play exercises
Presentation exercises	Workflow or in-tray exercise (some aspects may be online)

Following completion of the activities, the observers who have been assessing the participants’ behavior at the development center will meet to discuss and integrate the evidence collected throughout the day. After the integration meeting, detailed output will be produced outlining strengths and development points for each of the participants involved within a formal professional development process.

Information gathered from the development center will be collated to form the basis of developmental feedback reports for each of the participants. These will provide information regarding candidates’ performance alongside the competencies used within the development process.

**Option 2: The “Day in the Life” Development Center**

An alternative option to the traditional development center is a “Day in the Life” development center. The principles of assessment remain the same, as do options with regard to resourcing of the day. However, the key difference is that the exercises used (selected from the various assessments highlighted in Option 1) are seamlessly integrated with each other (all follow through the same scenario gradually building more tasks, activities and complexity).

The “Day in the Life” center creates a scenario whereby participants assume the identity (for a day) of an individual working within a real or fictitious organization, while taking part in a variety of different exercises.

The event consists of a background briefing pack being provided to all candidates, introducing them to an imaginary organization, role and scenario. They are presented with a range of information at the start, which forms the basis for all of the activities that must be addressed or undertaken over the course of the day, including attending specific meetings and responding to requests for written

information. They are given a schedule that contains information on various tasks and activities, and outlines specific deadlines, such as internal meetings, report writing and solutions to be generated and delivered.

This particular approach could be designed to replicate the role of an individual working within an organization, and is an excellent way of evaluating individual performance and ascertaining whether they have developed to the standard required from them to be able to take their next career move. In basic terms, the “Day in the Life” approach assesses current ability, but also familiarizes and prepares participants for the new challenges they will have to face in the future.

As a result, it could be argued that “Day in the Life” development centers provide a more accurate assessment of participant strengths and development needs within a realistic business environment. The creation of online development centers incorporating these principles is also now available as a way of reducing and maximizing the resourcing implications of this approach.

It is suggested that behavioral and personality assessments are used as part of the process. However, to maintain as much realism on the day as possible, we would suggest this takes place separately from the activities taking place during the day.

As with Option 1, all information gathered throughout the day is integrated and feedback development reports are generated for participants. Feedback and development discussions are also held with all participants.

**Option 3: The “Development Day” Approach**

An alternative to the development center is the “Development Day” approach. Here, the onus moves away from the traditional “assessment” approach and focuses on making the event about development; the primary objective here involves facilitating individual development action.

This can be achieved by using additional techniques to assess candidates as opposed to just the traditional assessment/development center tools. Here, a combination of data is collected immediately prior to the event, and acted upon during the course of the “Development Day” itself.

For instance, participants may be asked to complete a 360 degree competency questionnaire prior to the event. This would allow them to self-assess against the competencies (used as part of the process) and gain feedback from their managers, colleagues and potentially, customers. Multi-rater feedback has gained popularity in the last few years, but one of the most common criticisms of this method is the fact that while the data is powerful, it is often not

acted upon. Following the multi-rater process with a customized “Development Day” could help to avoid that pitfall.

The “Development Day” will start with an in-depth feedback session with an experienced HR consultant or coach. This involves familiarizing the participant with the findings of the instrument and then working with him/her to formulate an initial development action plan. The strengths and development needs identified in this meeting will then form the basis of the rest of the day’s activities for each participant.

Following this, participants will work through a variety of different development exercises either alone or with support provided by the consultant/coach. The aim of this approach is to allow them to focus on the competencies that the participants feel they need to develop. Participants will work with their coach throughout the day and will be given ongoing development feedback as the event unfolds.

The format of this session typically involves the coach briefly introducing each exercise and the competencies that it assesses. The participant can then decide how to approach the exercises, such as experimenting with a new style. Following the exercise, both coach and participant will assess performance (possibly using video playback) and the participant can then decide whether to tackle the exercise a second time, or move on to a different one.

Ideally, the event will require a ratio of one consultant to each participant on the “Development Day” event. However, it may be possible to run the event with a ratio of one consultant to two participants. (It should be noted that this would be at the cost of time spent individually with participants on the day.) At the end of the event, or following it, the coach and the participant will work to formulate an ongoing development plan based upon all the activities that have taken place over the day.

Once the development plan has been formulated and agreed, participants can be linked to the consultant they have been working with on the “Development Day” for continuing mentoring over the following months. Guidance can be provided as participants attempt to work through their final development plan, which should be a living document (with tangible outcomes and achievable objectives) and not something that will be confined to a dusty shelf. Once again, this could be supported by the use of a development plan aligned to a core set of competencies that provide an indication of candidates’ performance levels.

#### **Option 4: The Project-Based Development Process**

Taking a step further from the traditional development center approach, the project-based development process is underpinned by the concept of development being an ongoing and continual process. In essence, the individual is led through a “development

opportunity” with peer support and business-led coaching to guide him/her along the way.

The basis of the development is business projects. These are undertaken by groups of the target sample, all of whom should be at a similar level in terms of business experience, career aspirations and development requirements.

Performance on the project is assessed in terms of achievement of deliverables and observed behaviors. Experience and research clearly demonstrate that development activity is most effective when linked to workplace activity. It should have a key business deliverable as an outcome (i.e. there is a real business rationale for doing it, there is a focus to achieve the deliverable for the individuals and the organization, and there is a personal deliverable in terms of development and self-awareness).

Informed decisions can be made about people’s development needs and potential by observing their performance on the project. The feedback provided to the participants involved is used to foster the development of increased self-awareness, as well as to create a culture of personal development.

Although the project-based option differs slightly from the original development center context, it represents an opportunity to do something different than the traditional event-based development process. By participating in project-based development, participants gain experience. This type of work will benefit them from a developmental point of view and the organization as a whole in terms of collaborative business-focused deliverables.

#### **The Way Forward**

It is fundamental that your organization is able to build on the capabilities of your most talented individuals. Processes such as development centers are an essential means of identifying the strengths and development requirements of such individuals currently working within your organization.

Furthermore, this diagnostic and consultative approach to development serves as a means of empowering participants within the process to seek out opportunities for the enhancement of their capabilities within a business environment. From an organizational point of view, the capabilities embedded within a business have an intangible value to investors outside the organization. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of HR and business managers alike to ensure that every effort is made to identify and nurture those people who possess qualities capable of being developed to meet future business requirements.

Do not be put off by what you perceive to be difficulties and challenges that are associated with development centers. They are stretching for the assessors and participants alike, but truly

show an organizational commitment to development. It relies heavily upon the post development center experience (coaching and performance management) to maximize and nurture the growth, but the track record of well-designed and implemented development centers is proven. One particular client saw a 320 percent return on its investment. Can you afford not to seek out and develop your talent before someone else does? ■

### **About the Author**

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Dave Millner is the director of consultancy services for the Kenexa Global Assessment Practice, and has established a professional HR consultancy practice with a range of products and services that complement and support psychometric and online assessments from Kenexa. He has worked directly with a variety of organizations, offering a range of assessment, development and performance-based solutions, including Churchill Insurance, Learning Skills Council, Royal Bank of Scotland, NatWest Retail, Inland Revenue, HM Treasury, Spirit Group, GE Consumer Finance, Scottish and Newcastle Group, Energizer, Yates Group and TEC International as a speaker to various executive members.

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