

The Role of Assessment in a Modern Police Service



Introduction

Reed Consulting is a market leading assessment services provider to Police Forces throughout the UK. As the Head of Assessment Services I commissioned this research on the promotion of senior police officers to provide an insight into assessment methods currently used, in order to support those involved in promotion decisions.

Many thanks to those that have contributed to the project. Launching a Knowledge Network for all contributors has proven a useful way to learn from others and is enabling the sharing of thoughts and ideas on effective promotion assessments to develop best practice methods.

As an Occupational Psychologist with over 10 years experience in assessment methods, including my position as Head of Assessments at the Metropolitan Police Service, I am now working with a team of experts at Reed Consulting in designing and delivering police assessments. Through working with a number of Police Forces to develop promotion assessments, my team's experience in this field is genuinely supporting the development of a modern Police Service.

I have used my knowledge within the Police Service to reveal the degree to which promotions assessments identify candidates best suited to meet current challenges in this report. I hope that you find it valuable and interesting.

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The research project

As an extension of the work that Reed Consulting delivers for a number of UK Police Forces, we recently undertook a survey on the assessment methods used across the UK for the promotion of senior police officers. In addition, a round table discussion with a number of individuals responsible for assessment design within these Police Forces has led to the formation of a 'Knowledge Network'. This network intends to generate a deeper understanding of the issues currently facing Police Forces and also to provide the opportunity for Police Forces to share thoughts and ideas on best practice.

The survey focussed on those assessment methods used to guide promotion decisions for the roles of Chief Inspector and Superintendent and the round table event enabled attendees to extend the discussion and cover a broader range of promotion assessments.

The graph demonstrates that all respondent Police Forces use panel interviews and over 90% use an application form for promotions to both Chief Inspector and Superintendent. All other forms of assessment are much less common and their use varies considerably across Police Forces.

Nearly 50% of Police Forces use presentations for promotions to the role of Chief Inspector. However discussions within the 'Knowledge Network' suggest that the precise format of these presentations varies across Police Forces, with some requesting the candidates to prepare a presentation prior to the assessment day, whilst others are given a subject on the day and given only a short period of time to prepare. In many cases presentations are backward looking, with officers describing their experiences of challenging situations.

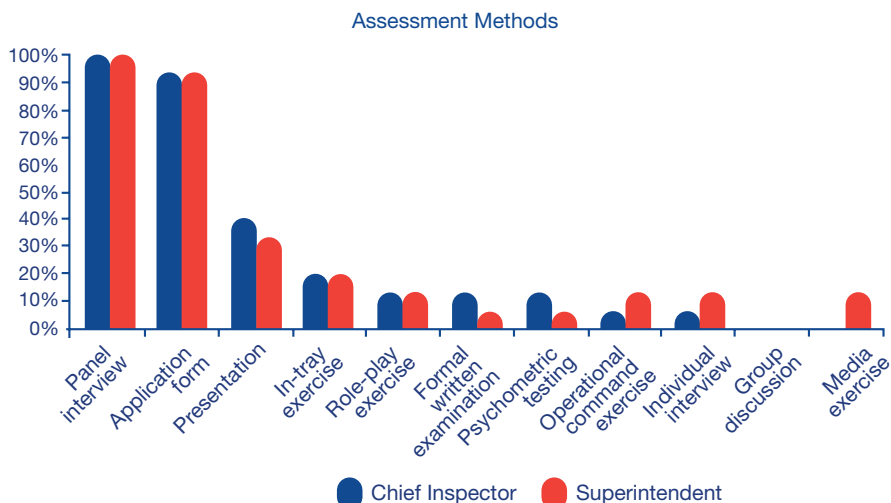
There appears to be a desire on the part of many Police Forces to focus on an officer's past record when making promotion decisions, rather than seeking to push candidates to show how they would perform in the new role. A clear limitation of this approach is the risk of failing to take into account the different skills or competencies required once an officer has been promoted to a more senior post.

For example, those officers promoted to the rank of Superintendent will typically have much more regular contact with print and visual media than earlier in their careers. Therefore media exercises, as currently used by a small number of Police Forces, can be a method of predicting a candidate's ability to handle tasks and skills that they have thus far had less opportunity to demonstrate.

The findings

Past behaviour is no guarantee of future performance

The assessment methods used to guide promotion decisions for the ranks of Chief Inspector and Superintendent are still largely based on the traditional application form and panel interview, with all Police Forces utilising interviews, and the vast majority requesting that officers complete an application form. In addition, a variety of other assessment methods are used to complement standard measures, which is shown in the graph below.



Design and Delivery of Fair Assessments

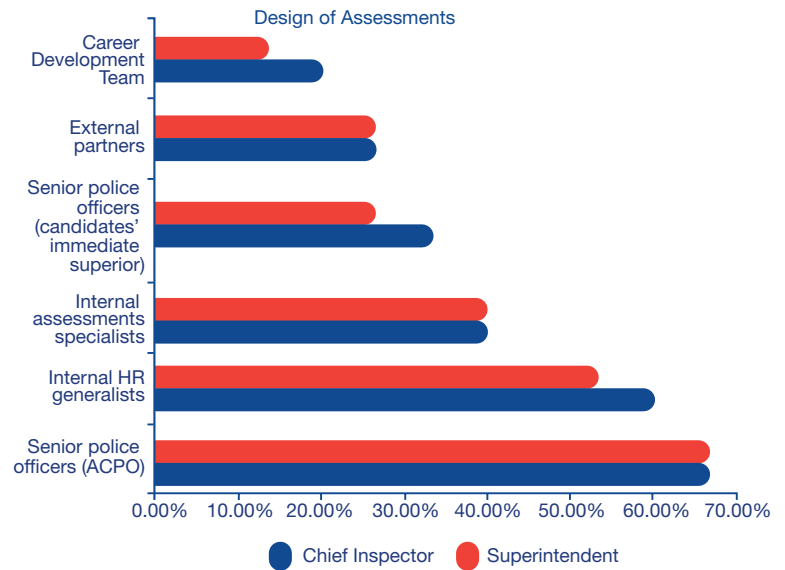
The figures from Reed Consulting's survey demonstrate how important senior and experienced police officers are to the assessment of promotion candidates, both in terms of design and delivery of the promotion board and associated processes.

The survey found that nearly 70% of respondent Police Forces use senior police officers in the design of assessment exercises. This quite clearly shows that an in-depth understanding of the demands of senior police work is still regarded vital to the creation of effective assessment measures. An even higher percentage (92%) use senior officers in the delivery of promotion assessments.

Despite this high level of engagement, some Police Forces raised concerns over the contribution of senior officers as assessors. Most concerns were regarding the availability of senior officers to undertake assessments, but a minority were concerned about the officers' ability to assess effectively and fairly, given their lack of assessments-specific training.

Nearly half of the survey respondents felt that there is a lack of confidence in the promotion process amongst candidates. Whilst a level of concern is typical in any organisation, the difference between methods used by different Police Forces and within some organisations makes this more substantial than in other sectors. The 'Knowledge Network' in particular discussed the difference between uniform and detective officers. In some Police Forces there is a perception that uniformed officers have an easier job getting promotions due to detectives having to go to a special CID board after they have been through the main promotion board. As a contrast, other Police Forces feel the opposite. There is also some feeling amongst CID officers that it is harder to attain the rank of DCI than Chief Inspector.

Although these concerns are substantial they do not imply that senior officers should not be involved in the promotions process as assessors, but they do indicate the importance of HR specialists to complement the senior officers' practical knowledge.



In most Police Forces the practical experience is usually complemented by some measure of professional expertise, with HR generalists involved in the process at around 60% of Police Forces. A slightly smaller proportion (40%) utilise the skills of internal assessments specialists when designing promotion assessments. In all instances, as would be expected, either internal or external specialists play an active part in the delivery of the process.

The use of such expertise can be invaluable when a force is aiming to design effective, workable and fair assessments, particularly at times when the nature of the skills being assessed is changing significantly.

As a reflection of the wider role of modern policing, a number of the Police Forces involved in the 'Knowledge Network' now run a continuous improvement approach to their promotions process. Notable additions in recent years include inviting independent parties to join the process, with some engaging Police Federation representatives as observers, and others establishing roles for community 'lay people' e.g. representatives from the Local Authority. In some instances, the significance of community policing is such that the lay representatives are engaged at all ranks.

Reflecting modern challenges in Assessments

A key theme raised at Reed Consulting's round table discussion with police professionals was the changing demands facing UK Police Forces, with numerous factors altering the ways in which Police Forces need to operate. In view of this, the research sought to clarify the major challenges facing senior leadership teams and also the degree to which promotion assessments are designed to help identify those candidates best suited to meeting them.

The graph below shows the major challenges and also the percentage of Police Forces addressing these issues in their assessments.

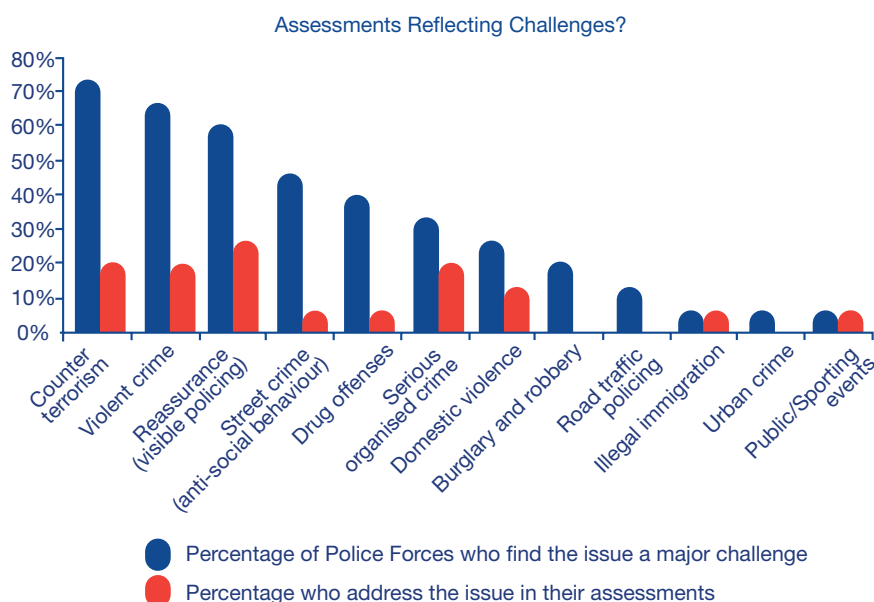
These findings show that surprisingly few Police Forces' assessment processes overtly reflect the major challenges they face. For example, 73% of Police Forces listed counter terrorism as a major challenge they are currently facing, while only 20% address the issue in their assessment process.

Some Police Forces however, have successfully incorporated real life police scenarios into their assessments through role play exercises and in-tray exercises. This allows the assessments to reflect the challenges the officer will face in the role and helps to ensure that only the candidates best equipped to deal

with the challenges are successful. It was also recognised by some Police Forces that the types of crime they commonly face are only one influencing factor when determining priorities. The influence of Home Office directives, for example, must also be considered.

Internally, the two most prominent HR issues currently facing UK Police Forces are diversity and performance management, with 87% and 73% of Police Forces listing these as major issues. The importance of these issues does vary across the country, but where relevant is often reflected in the promotions process. For instance, a number of Police Forces will automatically fail candidates who score poorly on diversity awareness, regardless of how highly they may have scored on the other competencies.

It should be noted that this approach constitutes only a negative decision and must be supported by adequate feedback and guidance for the officer. The approach does not serve to identify those candidates who perform exceptionally well in another area. Nor does it identify the underlying reasons for the lack of awareness, unless it is part of a balanced assessment model that reflects all of the relevant issues for both the Police Service and the community.



How to know if assessment practices are working

53% of our respondents felt that there are currently concerns over whether their assessment process identifies the best candidates.

In order to complement the formal promotion process, there is feeling amongst some Police Forces that it is both possible and desirable to promote individuals who can grow into the role, rather than promoting the finished product. Some Police Forces have introduced stretch role assignments, which may vary in length and allow the candidate to hold temporary duties at the higher rank.

Given the evident concern regarding the reliability of some procedures, it is possible to run validation exercises to prove/disprove the effectiveness of the assessment processes. This is because the systems, processes and measures already exist to compare performance in the role with that expected at the time of promotion. The debate within the 'Knowledge Network' showed that there is room for improvement in the Performance Development Reviews, with suggestions to include 'hard' measures such as crime clear-up rates and budget management.

Feedback between these two processes will enable the development of a process which is more accurately able to predict future performance through a balanced mix of assessment methods.

Conclusion

The promotion assessments carried out by UK Police Forces continue to demonstrate a degree of consistency, with application forms and panel interviews being almost universally applied. However, outside of these standard measures there is a broad range of approaches and methods applied. This is down to Police Forces seeking to ensure that promotion procedures and the senior officers they identify can match the rapidly changing environment in the Police Force.

The use of other assessment methods to complement the panel interview varies, with some Police Forces selecting those measures that allow candidates to demonstrate strong past performance, while others seek to predict likely competence in the different skills demanded at the senior rank. Furthermore, the degree to which an individual Police Force's particular situation or challenge is reflected in role plays or presentations is a decision that each Police Force can take when determining the most appropriate process.

The effectiveness and fairness of promotions assessments is a key concern, with Police Forces perhaps as conscious as any type of organisation of the need for assessments procedures to be equitable, and also be seen as such. An evident link between promotion procedure and the senior post in question can help make this fairness clearer to all concerned.

It is also notable that the majority of Police Forces engage a combination of senior police officers and HR professionals when designing and delivering promotion assessments. This perhaps points to the key issue of the need for both practical experience and specialist expertise when ensuring a fair and effective method to identify the next group of senior officers.

About Reed Consulting

Reed Consulting is the specialist HR Consultancy and Outsourced Services provider of the Reed family of companies. Comprising four specialist practice areas - Recruitment Process Outsourcing, Graduate Recruitment, Assessment and Transition Services - Reed Consulting has over 300 CIPD/BPS qualified staff throughout the UK and is one of the fastest growing HR services companies in the UK.

Reed Consulting supports large, medium and small enterprises to improve their commercial performance through results-driven people practice.

About Assessment Services

Reed Consulting's Assessment Services offers organisations a comprehensive resource for the scoping, design and implementation of a wide range of recruitment and promotion board support tools. From commercial, off-the-shelf psychometric testing to bespoke and role-specific assessment centres, Reed Consulting specialists bring private and public sector organisations the psychological expertise and business acumen to ensure timely and insightful impacts.

About Police Assessments

With a growing client list among UK Police Forces and wide ranging experience of senior assessments from multiple sectors, Reed Consulting has developed a best practice model for police assessments.

Reed Consulting supports Police Forces in optimising resources at senior levels and managing promotional cycles to ensure the right volume and calibre of officers are being assessed. This provides strong people development and enables talented officers to be promoted at speed, while ensuring that no-one is ever promoted beyond their current ability. The review and selection procedures are all aligned to the requirements of the particular Police Force and the existing talent pool.

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