Suitability of assessment centres for graduate architects recruitment in Southwest Nigeria

Folahan Anthony Adenaike[1*], Ibukun Joseph Talabi[1], Olusola Adebayo Amusan[1] and El-Hassan Olabode Ariyibi[1]

[1] Department of Architecture, Lagos State University of Science and Technology, Ikorodu, Nigeria

Correspondence Author: Folahan Anthony Adenaike

Abstract

The hiring of graduate architects especially in the developing world can be very challenging. Organizations are faced with an overwhelming number of applicants who are often qualified with very few openings for them to fill. Contemporary practice in architecture requires more versatile and enterprising individuals to excel. This research set out to investigate the use of assessment centres in the screening process for engaging graduate architects. The investigation was carried out through literature research and administration of questionnaire among firms that hire architects in southwest Nigeria. Findings from the investigations indicate that assessment centres help to identify interpersonal and behavioural tendencies in individuals and may not be enough to singularly screen architects especially those who will carry out designs. The study concludes that assessment centres will give organizations who need architects for interpersonal and more public assignments a better leverage for getting the right fit for recruitment but must come after other screening methods have dovetailed the applicants into a few persons with strong cognitive abilities.

Keywords: behavioural tendency, cognitive ability, evaluation, graduate architects, personality, screening

Introduction

Using assessment centers as a method to identify potential employees and determine graduates' suitability for recruitment is usually carried out under standardized conditions that subject candidates to a combination of individual and group exercises which simulate the expected conditions of the job at hand (Wirz *et al.*, 2020) [23]. This method of evaluating candidates became popular in the 1960s (Thornton & Rupp, 2006) [19]. The operations of any "assessment center" for international standards is a combination of essential steps that are structured and itemized in the Guidelines and Ethical Considerations of Assessment Center Operations (International Task Force, 2015). The assessors observe each candidate's demeanour and disposition to the simulated conditions which will serve as basis for determining candidates' suitability for employment. The ultimate objective is to capture an overall assessment of an applicant's ability to be efficient in executing his future assignments in the organization. Thus, scores are usually combined into an overall assessment rating, which can then be used for decision-making. There are no fixed standards for timing assessment centres though the exercises will normally run their course from a half of a working day to a maximum of two days on the average (Thornton & Gibbons, 2009) [20]. Beyond being deployed for recruitment, assessment centres can be used for promotion of internal personel (Howard & McNelly, 2000; Lievens & Thornton III, 2017) [7,12], identification of high potentials (Thornton, Rupp & Hoffman, 2014) [21], certification of competence (Dayan, Kasten & Fox, 2002) [6], and external selection (Damitz, Manzey, Kleinmann & Severin, 2003) [5]. This recruitment screening method occurs more at the tail end of the recruitment process after other stages like using bio-data, application forms, resumes, aptitude tests and interviews have been concluded. The use of any one or combination of the mentioned screening methods for assessment is the prerogative of the organization having considered the peculiarities of the position being applied for and the quality of applicants to be screened.

Where assessment centres have been chosen for graduate recruitment, the criterion-related validity of whatever indices are used to assess the candidates must consider their relative inexperience as different from assessing candidates who are seeking higher management positions in organizations (Caballero & Walker, 2010) [3]. Graduates may also be coming from different fields of endeavour and specialisations which makes it imperative that the assessment methods must necessarily prepare a level playing field for every applicant, irrespective of their previous exposures.

This submission explores the peculiarity of recruitment within a background of assessment centres for organizations who are interested in fresh graduates of architecture in southwest Nigeria. Employing fresh graduates will usually involve pulling from a wide range of related fields of study with a view to engaging successful applicants in further training for the task at hand. The flip-side of this position is assessment of applicants who are already engaged in similar volitions that are now contending for a higher position either within a company of similar organizations. For graduate architects, the educational training in Nigeria is in mainstream architecture. Those that train outside the country may have specialisations at Master degree level. Higher institutions in Nigeria are beginning to specialise architects at post graduate level too. There are however very few and far apart instances where

employers require the specialized architects to take up positions. A general training in architecture ensures that the students are constantly involved in problem solving and would have imbibed the technicalities of solving social problems with spatial technocracy. Recruitment of graduate architects in the area hardly require specialized candidates. This generalization of applicants may not be the same for higher level employment where experience and exposure to particular situations may be required.

The research commenced with literature study of the concept of assessment centres in different parts of the world and their efficacies in different fields of endeavour. Having established enough familiarity with the experiences encountered in literature, the research proceeded to field investigations by administering questionnaire to employers of graduate architects in southwest Nigeria. The opinions of consulting firms, construction industry multinationals and government offices were sought in the investigations. Random sampling method was employed end efforts were made to reach as many respondents as possible. A total of 682 registered consulting firms of building professionals were obtained from the registers of professionals and the ministries of works, planning and their parastatals were also identified for questionnaire administration. 800 instruments were distributed through emails of which 392 responses were received at the time of collation. The responses were sorted into usable data and analysed for discussions and conclusions. The responses from the field survey questionnaire on the perception of assessment centres as credible screening method for graduate architect's recruitment in southwest Nigeria and other enquiries that are related to the exposure and understanding of the respondents and their opinion on that other issues that relate to the subject matter were analysed and coded on the 5-point Likert scale legend as shown in Table 1.

Tab 1: 5-Point Likert Scale Legend

Code	Significance
0 to 1	Strongly Disagree
1 to 2	Disagree
2 to 3	Undecided
3 to 4	Agree
4 to 5	Strongly Agree

For easy reference, the table can be interpreted as follows; 0-0.99 is strongly disagree; 1.0-1.99 is disagree; 2.0-2.99 is undecided; 3.0-3.99 is agree; and 4.0-4.99 is strongly agree.

Graduate recruitment

Recruiting graduates for direct employment or as trainees is getting more competitive and painstaking as expectation stakes are becoming higher in the real world. Human resources technocrats are requesting for higher performance levels and cognitive abilities even from fresh graduates. Time and cost saving tools like online tests are usually conducted to screen candidates before applying more detailed assessment tools (Karabasevic *et al*., 2016) [9]. Of essence is the choice of assessment tools that can identify true leaders and efficient

trainees to drive optimum results for the organization. Well-designed and organized tools of assessment are necessary to determine future performance and individuals' suitability for employment (Thornton & Gibbons, 2009) [20]. The right assessment tools should offer enough insight to enable the assessors to arrive at well informed decisions about each candidate. Behavioural tendencies, personality, individual skills and levels of perception should be easily accessed by the tools (Klassen & Kim, 2019). While combining assessment tools may increase the chances of making better informed decisions, having too many tools can actually defeat the purpose. There are three main areas of individuals that are readily assessed by graduate recruiters. They are cognitive ability, behavioural tendency and personality traits.

Cognitive ability is accessed through aptitude and ability testing (Williams & Tassinari, 2015; Caballero & Walker, 2010). Aptitude and ability tests help to ascertain the cognitive abilities of individuals that can be useful in the workplace. They are designed to identify strengths and weaknesses in data assimilation, critical thinking, problem solving and analytical thinking. These go beyond their exposure to specific areas of competence and academic performance. A well-designed range of aptitude tests would have evaluated the numeral, verbal competence of applicants. It will also show the ability of the individuals to address problems in different scenarios with critical reasoning.

Behavioural tendency is observed using assessment centres and behavioural based testing tools (Klassen & Kim, 2019) [10]. These tools go beyond the aptitude tests to determine other competencies of individuals, using process driven activities. An assessment centre is not a location. The behavioural disposition of individuals within the contexts of the workplace and expected roles in performing their duties are observed using case studies, role play, focused group discussions, analytical exercises and presentations in assessment centres.

Personality traits are deciphered through personality assessment (Klassen & Kim, 2019) [10]. These tools evaluate the core natures of individuals in personal interests, values, motivation and interpersonal skills with respect to the needs of the organization. They are tools that help to properly profile the individual and can help people to understand themselves better. Graduate recruitment decisions to select the best talents should always be based on assessments (Williams & Tassinari, 2015; Caballero & Walker, 2010) [22, 3]. Beyond being a scientific process, it helps to make informed decisions due the robust amount of information made available to assessors. It is also cost-effective in the long run if the cost of hiring the wrong set of people is factored in and saves time. Assessments also increase efficiency by giving room to screen more candidates with a pool of more potential candidates made available even after selection. Using assessment also helps to maintain objectivity in appointments as candidates are selected without the influence of undue bias.

Graduate recruitment in Nigeria have been investigated in many studies (Dabalen, Oni and Adekola, 2000; Pitan and Adedeji, 2012; Stutern, 2016) [4, 16], in studies that assessed Nigerian graduates on possession of soft skills like critical

thinking, oral and written communication apt decision taking and analytical skills. The studies did not address the question of devising appropriate screening methods to identify more employable or suitable hands for different organizations. The major issue being discussed is the employability of the Nigerian graduate. The proliferation of higher institutions in the country since the beginning of the new millennium has brought the quality of the graduates being produced into question. Organizations now place a higher premium on their employability and its sustenance (Marock, 2008) [14]. The training of graduate architects in Nigeria is expected to be complemented with hands-on training in the industry to expose them to different situations. They also have to take professional examinations after some years to be fully registered as architects.

Assessment centres

Assessment centres being one of the definitive tools for recruiting graduates, have a lot of advantages (Thornton & Gibbons, 2009) [20] which are; (i) they simulate the real life situations to be encountered by the candidates, making it more effective; (ii) a more realistic perspective of the expected role-play of the of the candidates within the organization are already envisioned by the candidates; (iii) evaluation of candidates is less subjective since the set sate of criteria are used for all candidates; (iv) unsuccessful candidates are less disgruntled since they are aware of the transparency of the selection process; and (v) inputs for design of further training of successful candidates can be generated from the data obtained from feedback loop of the assessment centres.

There are however a few downside issues in using assessment centres to screen candidates for graduate recruitment (Thornton & Gibbons, 2009) [20], which are; (i) candidates are usually not aware of the full-range of indices being used to assess them and issues may arise during the tasks that may end up being used to evaluate the candidates even when assessors know that the issues were not pre-determined before the exercises; and (ii) a lot of anxiety is generated in the candidates during the interactive sessions of the exercises making them loose composure or over-react because of the high stakes inherent in the assessment centre atmosphere which may not be the same in the real-life work environment where things are more relaxed without the pressure of a 'one-hour' time limit and fear of failure. While these disadvantages are very relevant in evaluating the suitability of assessment centres as a good tool for graduate recruitment, it can also be argued that working under pressure and being at their best always should be a good attribute for a good hireling.

The screening of architects in southwest Nigeria is usually carried out within closed processes where candidates are pooled from recommendations and internal advertisements for small organizations. It is only open for higher level positions where highly experienced architects are invited to take up managerial and executive positions in larger organizations like government institutions. For the graduate architects who are seeking entry level positions, they may face assessment-centre screening tests. The higher-level entrants are more likely to be screened based on their experience and exposure to similar task demands of the intended positions and socio-political clouts that organizations can garner from the individuals.

Survey findings and results

Preliminary findings during the pilot studies revealed that the industry is not conversant with the term 'assessment centre" despite the widespread deployment of the method. Most of the respondents had been exposed to the operation of assessment centres but never used the terminology since it is more associated with professionals in human resources management circles. They had conducted sessions and been involved in evaluation circumstances that used the settings of assessment centres in milder forms and sometimes in stronger presentations of the concept. The questionnaire had preambles that explained the concept of assessment centres and gave vivid examples to prepare the respondents for a better interaction with the instrument. A summary of the date from the survey are presented in table 2 where the term "assessment centre" is represented with AC.

Having concluded the survey, it was discovered that only 7.8% of the respondents had come across the term assessment centres before the questionnaire interaction while 93.2% are aware of the practice. 68.4% had been involved in similar processes which were just regarded as screening or evaluation exercises. This is an indication the assessment centres are commonly deployed in the study area without being referred to as such. This position can be accepted since the term is mostly used in the field of management studies. The respondents are more involved in the construction industry.

Tab 1: Responses to survey questionnaire

Perception	Likert Score	Inference
ACs are common in SW Nigeria	2.16	Undecided
ACs are relevant in management level screening	2.46	Undecided
ACs are only relevant in management level screening	1.98	Disagree
AC is a good method for screening architects	3.82	Agree
Only job positions that interact with public need AC screening	2.26	Undecided
ACs method only is sufficient for architects screening	0.66	Strongly disagree
ACs needs to be combined with other methods for efficiency	4.11	Strongly agree
ACs may not necessarily evolve the best candidate	3.49	Agree
ACs can easily be compromised	2.09	Undecided
ACs are not necessary for architects screening	1.83	Disagree
Very qualified architects can fail AC screening	2.95	Undecided

The general notion among the respondents is that assessment centres are more relevant for positions that require interpersonal management skills where they are necessary beyond cognitive aptitudes. A score of 2.46 which is termed "undecided" on the Likert scale is tending towards agreement for the perception that the method is relevant for management level screening. The relevance of the method for architects' recruitment is not in doubt as scores for its usefulness for recruiting architects and combining it with other methods are on the agreement side of the scale. Some doubts are however cast on the method respondents agree that it may not select the best candidate. They are doubtful that it can be compromised and are almost in agreement with a 2.98 score that a qualified person may not perform well in an evaluation using the method.

Discussion

Having examined the intricacies involved in the tools available for evaluating candidates for graduate recruitment, it must be emphasized that the major objective of any of the processes is to ensure that the best hands for the particular job are identified. It is the prerogative of the management of the organization to carry out the selection (Albrecht *et al*., 2015) [1]. The ideal is to give the jobs to the most successful candidates. There are however many instances where some extreme performances of an individual in certain aspects of the assessment are considered too strong to be ignored (Nielsen, 2016) [13] and will affect selection. Such non-parametric attributes like verbal communication, looks of an individual, poise and even physical disability to mention a few can also affect selection knowing fully well that they are not prescribed indices for assessment. Subjective intrusions like these into the selection process often arise from physical interviews and assessment centres. With this threatening gap between performance and selection, can assessment centres truly be fingered as the best tool for graduate recruitment? Moreover, findings from other studies in Nigeria indicate that personality traits do not reflect directly on job performance in most instances (Nwogu, 2015) [15]. There are two major sides to the duties of architects within organizations; spatial technocracy and interpersonal relations. Having good skills in both areas is of advantage to any prospective employee. Using assessment centres to screen graduate architects may however concentrate more on the interpersonal skills to the detriment of the cognitive ability's evaluation. Architects are sometimes required to present portfolios of their previous designs and school projects as part of the evaluation during recruitment. Such presentations are to assess their cognitive ability and aptitude in solving previous design problems. If the screening needs to go beyond the presentations and interviews, well-structured assessment centres may be necessary to complete the evaluation processes and conclude the recruitment. The consciousness that assessment centres may become part of a recruitment process for graduate architects will discourage plagiarism among the participants since they are aware that presentation of resumes and past works will be further tested with practical situations during screening.

Every individual is unique (Amunga, 2021) [2] in cognitive ability, behaviour and personality. None of these three components of individuals can be ignored when hiring graduates for jobs that require high levels of aptitude and human relations. If the jobs at hand do not involve meeting people like responsibilities of managing just numeric data or designs as the case may be for architects within the workplace, behaviour and personality traits can be ignored in selecting tools for graduate recruitment. There are however hardly any engagements that do not involve having minimum levels of quantitative and verbal aptitude. This is probably why minimum levels of proficiency are required in mathematics and language are required for admission into higher institutions in most fields of endeavour. By the nature of their work, architects hardly work alone in any organization. Their work is directly related to resolving social problems and will always require input and evaluation from others within the workplace and beyond. This requires a minimum level of behavioural control and personal interactions for better job output.

Assessment centres by their nature can bring out the most suitable candidates within certain limits of individual dispositions if they are well structured (Thornton & Gibbons, 2009; Wirz *et al*., 2020) [20]. Where they are applied as a singular tool in the screening process, they become grossly inadequate since they can at their best only decipher the behaviours assertive tendencies of individuals while addressing issues. Other aspects of their inherent personality and aptitude are not readily made available to assessors. The time allocated for the assessment centre evaluation may even be too short to fully expose the behaviours of the individuals at the end of the exercise (Krause *et al*., 2011; Taylor & Nevis, 2001) [11, 18]. However, where assessment centres are used as evaluation tools at the end of a screening processes where other attributes of the applicants have been properly evaluated, they complement the other tools to further screen the candidates and dove-tail the recruitment into the direct needs of the organization. Such level of importance cannot be over-emphasized. If assessment centres are deployed in the middle of other assessment tools, they may contribute positively to the recruitment process if candidates are not being shortlisted after each stage. If candidates are retained beyond the screening by the assessment centres, the subjective outcomes that can influence decisions are contained since candidates can still fare better in subsequent exercises. Ideally, assessment centres should be deployed at the terminal stages of graduate recruitment processes. For recruiting graduate architects, assessment centres will yield better results if they come after presentations of their portfolios and resumes. They should be structured firstly to defend whatever materials have been presented before testing their disposition toward the real-time expectations of the organizations.

Conclusion

Graduate recruitment is a common phenomenon that recurs in organizations that employ enough graduates to ensure production of quality products and services (Williams & Tassinari, 2015; Caballero & Walker, 2010) [22, 3]. The

processes involved are usually designed to promote the brand of the organization while improving on their outputs (Taylor & Nevis, 2001) [18]. Assessment centres are just a type of evaluation tool to investigate the individuals with a view to getting the right fit for the organization by organizing tasks for them that mimic real life situations. These centres which may not be place-specific and can even be virtual have been used successfully over time to recruit graduates. The concomitants of using assessment centres for graduate architect's recruitment have been discussed at length and the following conclusions have been arrived at.

- Assessment centres in the absolute, without combining other assessment tools cannot yield the best results for graduate architect's recruitment.
- Assessment centres even when combined with other tools of graduate architect's recruitment are best deployed at the tail-end having concluded other assessment tools like aptitude tests and presentations.

References

1. Albrecht SL, Bakker AB, Gruman JA, Macey WH, Saks AM. Employee engagement, human resource management practices and competitive advantage: An integrated approach. Journal of Organizational Effectiveness. 2015;2(1):7-35. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOEPP-08-2014-0042

2. Amunga J. A new decade for social changes. Technium Social Sciences Journal, 2021, 30. www.techniumscience.com.

3. Caballero CL, Walker A. Work readiness in graduate recruitment and selection: A review of current assessment methods. Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability. 2010;1(1):13-25. https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2010vol1no1art546

4. Dablen, Andrew, Bankole Oni, Olatunde A Adekola. Labour Market Prospects of University Graduates in Nigeria, (Abuja: World Bank) 2000.

5. Damitz M, Manzey D, Kleinmann M, Severin K. Assessment center for pilot selection: Construct and criterion validity and the impact of assessor type. Applied Psychology. 2003;52(2):193-212.

6. Dayan K, Kasten R, Fox S. Entry-level police candidate assessment center: An efficient tool or a hammer to kill a fly! Personnel Psychology. 2002;55(4):827-849.

7. Howard L, McNelly T. Assessment center for team member level and supervisory development. In 28th International Congress on Assessment Center Methods. San Francisco, CA, 2000.

8. International Taskforce on Assessment Center Guidelines. Guidelines and ethical considerations for assessment center operations. Journal of Management. 2015;41(4):1244-1273.

9. Karabasevic D, Zavadskas EK, Turskis Z, Stanujkic D. The Framework for the Selection of Personnel Based on the SWARA and ARAS Methods Under Uncertainties. Informatica (Netherlands). 2016;27(1):49-65. https://doi.org/10.15388/Informatica.2016.76

10. Klassen RM, Kim LE. Selecting teachers and prospective teachers: A meta-analysis. Educational Research Review. 2019;26:32-51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.12.003

11. Krause DE, Rossberger RJ, Dowdeswell K, Venter N, Joubert T. Assessment center practices in South Africa. International Journal of Selection and Assessment. 2011;19(3):262-275. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2389.2011.00555.x

12. Lievens F, Thornton III GC. Assessment centers: Recent developments in practice and research. The Blackwell Handbook of Personnel Selection, 2017, 243-264.

13. Nielsen MW. Limits to meritocracy? Gender in academic recruitment and promotion processes. Science and Public Policy. 2016;43(3):386-399.

14. Marock C. Grappling with youth employability in South Africa. Unpublished paper, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 2008.

15. Nwogu GA. Graduate employability qualities and personality preference as determinants of job performance in Nigeria. European Scientific Journal, 2015, 11(25).

16. Pitan Oluyomi S, Adedeji SO. Skills Mismatch among University Graduates in the Nigerian Labour Market, US-China Education Review, A. 2012;1:90-98.

17. Stutern. The Nigerian Graduate Report, (Lagos: Stutern), 2016.

18. Taylor EK, Nevis EC. Personnel selection. Annual Review of Psychology. 2001;12:389-412. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.12.020161.002133

19. Thornton III GC, Rupp DE. Assessment centers in human resource management: Strategies for Prediction, diagnosis, and development. Psychology Press, 2006.

20. Thornton GC, Gibbons AM. Validity of assessment centers for personnel selection. Human Resource Management Review. 2009;19(3):169-187.

21. Thornton III GC, Rupp DE, Hoffman BJ. Assessment center perspectives for talent management strategies. Routledge, 2014.

22. Williams M, Tassinari A. Graduate Recruitment and Selection Evidence Report Understanding employers' graduate recruitment and selection practices – Evidence report Graduate Recruitment and Selection – Evidence Report. Institute for Employment Studies. 2015;231:1-48. www.hecsu.ac.uk

23. Wirz A, Melchers KG, Kleinmann M, Lievens F, Annen H, Blum U, *et al*. Do overall dimension ratings from assessment centres show external construct-related validity? In European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 2020, 29(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2020.1714593.