The assessment center:
Opportunities for women

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Personnel practices naturally, and of necessity, reflect current mores and assumptions about people, and, until recently, one set of assumptions that business has gone along with had it that the great majority of women would work for only the few years between leaving school and marrying, that they did not aspire to careers, that they should not be assigned to “unfeminine” jobs, and that, in fact, they lacked the ability to qualify for many types of positions. These beliefs, virtually unchallenged for years, have been expressed in employment policies that consider female applicants only for certain beginning jobs, in which those who are hired often find themselves at a dead end, with little chance to transfer into other job families and even less chance to work their way up into management. As a result, many organizations have a large number of female employees mostly in clerical and low-skilled jobs. Some may have advanced to the lowest level of supervision, but if so, they supervise other women in the same kind of work from which they themselves advanced. The few who have risen further are nearly always in staff assignments, rather than line management.

That situation is now changing, however, thanks to strong legal and social pressures for full equality of opportunity for employment and advancement. But effective change requires both motivation and method. Motivation to provide greater opportunity for women there is in abundance, not only in legislation and unrest among female employees, but in management’s growing awareness of the tremendous hidden waste incurred in the failure to let women use their full potential. Method, however, is something else. Good intentions alone won’t go far...
to correct imbalances and injustices that have been years in the making. Programs and techniques are needed.

Organizations characteristically have internal barriers that inhibit the free movement of employees from department to department or even from job family to job family, so even a white male who encounters no attitudinal resistance may not be utilized as well as he might be. These barriers include the inability to identify employees with unrealized potential, the reluctance of a department head to accept a transferee on somebody else's say-so or to part with a good employee, and candidates' lack of relevant experience to qualify for transfer. And if the white male employee has difficulty moving anywhere but straight up in the organization, it is all the more difficult for a woman. It is going to be very hard to convince managers who might take her on a transfer basis into a job usually thought of as "male" that she has the requisite ability. Even her own boss may be skeptical about advancing her, since the undemanding nature of many entry jobs for women does not allow a real demonstration of ability. What is needed in both instances is solid evidence that the woman candidate has the qualities called for by the proposed job.

A thorough evaluation of potential is needed not only as a persuader, but to determine that the candidate actually does have the abilities needed. A program of fuller utilization of women will proceed much more quickly if those who are transferred or advanced do well in their new assignments; too many poor choices would constitute a major setback. The answer may be the management assessment center, which has been demonstrated to be both an accurate method of evaluating potential and one that line managers are ready to accept. Introduced a little over a decade ago, this method is now being widely utilized in 15 large companies, including the Bell System, where it was designed, General Electric, IBM, and Sears, Roebuck and Company, as well as several government agencies.

How assessment centers work

The assessment center evaluates managerial ability and potential by putting the candidate in standardized performance situations where behavior can be observed and rated. These situations are especially designed to bring out dimensions important in supervisory management, such as leadership, flexibility, communications skills, planning and organizing, aptitude, decisiveness, and motivation. Although assessment centers use at least one well-known method, the interview, most of the candidate's time at the center is spent in special simulations. One of these, the in-basket, is used widely as a training device. It consists of a carefully planned sample of management problems presented to the assessee in the form of letters, reports, memos, records of incoming telephone messages, and the like. Both the management problems and the written material are tailored to the level of management for which the candidate is being considered. He works through the material, making decisions, scheduling meetings, writing memos and letters, as he would on the job, and is then interviewed to explore the reasons for his decisions, the depth of his perceptions, how he assigns values, and so forth.

A second type of simulation used in most assessment centers is the leaderless group discussion, with assigned roles. In this exercise the participants, usually six in number, are told that they are members of a task force, committee, or some other group, such as a school board. They are to assume that they are attending a meeting to make some sort of group decision—for example, the apportionment of a limited amount of money. Each participant, furthermore, is given a written briefing outlining the project that he is to push. The group then meets, with each participant trying to get a favorable hearing for his particular proposal while working with the others to reach a final decision.

Another group exercise is the short business game, in which the six participants are told that they are partners in a business enterprise. They may be asked to buy parts and put together simple articles that they sell back, in both cases at fluctuating prices. Such exercises are intended not to measure business acumen per se, but to reveal leadership, decisiveness, organizing ability, and comparably relevant qualities.

All exercises at the assessment center are observed by members of a trained staff, who pool their observations at a meeting in which each candidate is intensively reviewed. The candidate is rated on a number of management factors and a final judgment is then made about both the degree of management ability possessed and future developmental needs. A summary of these deliberations is sent to the appropriate level of management and face-to-face feedbacks to the individual participants are given within a week or two, often handled by the assessment staff members themselves.

What assessment centers are doing and can do

The assessment center has most often been used to evaluate candidates for promotion to management within their own departments, but more recently, one of the Bell System telephone companies has applied
the technique to facilitate the interdepartmental movement of employees who have already reached managerial levels in their departments. This procedure has enabled first-line managers in departments where there was a surplus of employees with second-level potential to move to departments short of second-level managers—transfers that had been very difficult before because the departments with the shortages were not sure that the candidates proposed actually were capable of rapid advancement in a new department. (About half of the candidates processed were, in fact, not recommended for transfer by the assessment staff.)

To repeat, many organizations want to open up channels of advancement for the many women now on their payrolls in jobs of little scope or opportunity, but management hesitates because of doubts that it can accurately identify those with high potential, because of the usual barriers to movement across departments and job families, and because of a lack of confidence on the part of some candidates themselves that they have the ability to move into a new job and advance from there. The assessment center can make a major contribution to the solution of all these problems. First, over ten years' experience has demonstrated that its methods greatly increase the accuracy of selection. Second, line managers have become more willing to accept recommendations from an assessment center than from other evaluation methods. And third, personal feedback interviews with successful candidates about their performance in competition seem to encourage them to accept the risks of transfer and accelerated advancement.

This discussion of assessment centers so far has been concerned with women who have been employed by an organization for some time and have already advanced into lower-level management, or at least into higher-skilled nonmanagement jobs. Many other women, however, are constantly being hired into routine entry jobs. Not all, of course, have a high degree of promotability, but even those who are more capable are likely to go undiscovered for years or resign before their possibilities are appreciated. What is needed is some type of early identification program. Assessment centers offer promise here, too. Procedures would not have to be as extensive or refined as in the centers outlined here. Those centers are aimed at a judgment of immediate promotability, and important decisions are based on the results, but in the case of an early identification center, all that is sought is the identification of those with notably higher ability. Those spotted would, of course, be moved along faster than others, but actual advancement to management or to a higher-level specialist's job would depend on performance in the post-assessment period.

If it is not feasible to assess every new employee through a one-day assessment procedure, assessment can be limited to those noted as promising by the employment office, trainers, and first-line supervisors. Later, once the program is under way, employees who want to volunteer might well be included.

Early identification need not, of course, be a women-only program; minority-group males, now being employed in greater numbers, should certainly be included. Women would reap great benefits, however, since they tend much more than men to be assigned to less demanding entry jobs, where their abilities cannot be observed so easily. A method that evaluates them objectively would be a powerful counterbalance.

No one argues that assessment of those already employed will solve all problems of giving women opportunities and rewards equal to those of men; equal opportunity at the employment office for women to be assigned to entry jobs on the same basis as men is fundamental. The assessment center can go a long way, though, toward opening up greater opportunities for the female employee and bringing about fuller utilization in the shortest possible time.

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