

Malcolm Surridge looks at how businesses select their employees and considers why some organisations are increasingly using methods other than interviews.

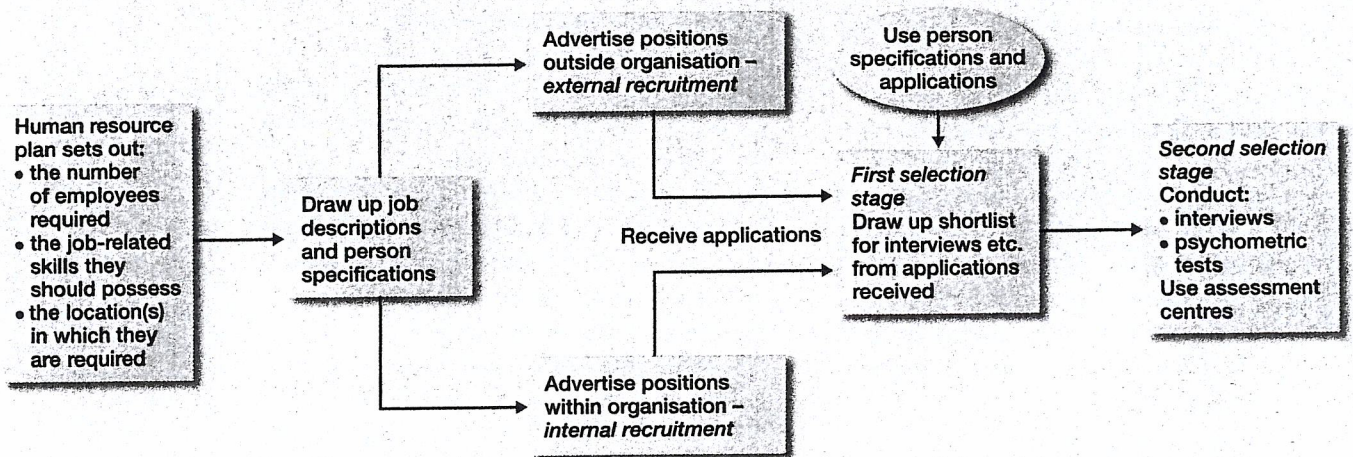
Choosing the best employees

Selection entails choosing one or more employees from among those who have applied for jobs with a business. It is a single, but important, stage of the recruitment process. Figure 1 illustrates the stages of recruitment and the part that selection plays. Recruitment starts with managers constructing a human resource plan setting the

Figure 1 The stages of recruitment and selection

organisation's future labour needs. Recruitment requires two key documents:

- a job description listing the duties and responsibilities of the specific job; and
- a person specification which states the knowledge, skills and experience required to carry out the job successfully.



Candidates who apply for the positions may either be employed by the business already or be seeking employment with the business from outside. Applications may be paper-based or, increasingly, electronic as many businesses make more use of technology. They are used in the first stage of selection. Managers responsible for recruitment will judge applications against the person specification and select those who have the most relevant skills, knowledge and experience to go through to the next stage of the selection procedure.

Methods of selection

As Figure 2 illustrates, UK businesses use a range of selection methods. Many businesses no longer rely exclusively on a single method of selection because they have become acutely aware of the high cost of appointing the wrong people. A recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) estimates the costs of labour turnover: an average cost per employee of £6,125 rising to £9,000 for senior managers or directors.

(1) Interviews This method of selection is commonly used, with interviews where candidates are asked to demonstrate a relevant work-related competency the most popular. In such interviews candidates are asked to demonstrate that they have the particular skill or 'key competency' sought by the firm. Candidates will be required to do this by drawing on examples from their experience, enabling the interviewer to assess their personality, skills and competencies, such as their teamworking and decision-making abilities.

Other types of interview are still used widely, though many writers question their effectiveness to select the best candidates. Critics argue that traditional interviews result in the appointment of people on the basis of factors such as interpersonal skills, appearance and communication skills. This may explain the increasing use of competency-based interviews to provide a framework for making decisions. The widespread use of telephone interviews reflects the importance of keeping recruitment costs to a minimum by avoiding transport and accommodation costs as well as the global nature of some companies' recruitment strategies.

(2) Personality and aptitude tests These tests are designed to reveal the character of candidates and are sometimes called psychometric tests. Such tests have become increasingly popular because of doubts about the effectiveness of interviews.

Method of selection	(%)
Competency-based interviews	69
Interviews based on contents of a CV/application form	68
Structured interviews (panel)	59
Telephone interviews	38
Personality and aptitude tests	35
Assessment centres	35
Online tests (selection)	17

Source: Adapted from CIPD Survey 2009 (CIPD.co.uk)

Figure 2 Methods used by UK businesses to select applicants

They contain questions designed to assess candidates' ability to work as part of a team, their commitment to the job, their decision-making skills, their confidence levels and whether their personality will 'fit' with their new colleagues.

(3) Assessment centres This method is a process rather than a place. The centres are frequently used in the later stages of selection, perhaps following an initial interview. They normally comprise an extended series of tasks designed to test candidates' knowledge and skills in job-related scenarios. Typical activities might include the following:

- an in-tray exercise that requires candidates to deal with realistic tasks in a limited time period;
- a presentation on a topic agreed in advance which may be assessed for its style as well as its content;
- group exercises and discussions to reveal knowledge and understanding of situations related to the business and job as well as interpersonal and communication skills;
- aptitude or psychometric tests; and
- possibly a second interview at which questions are asked on areas of doubt or perceived weaknesses from the first interview.

(4) Online tests Many employers now use online tests as a low-cost early selection method. These tests, commonly used in the early stages of recruitment, are designed to assess specific skills.

- Verbal tests assess verbal reasoning.
- Numerical tests show candidates' abilities to understand and process numerical data.
- Diagrammatic and spatial reasoning tests assess candidates' sense of logic and ability to deal with shapes.
- There are other specific tests, such as those relating to computer programming.

CASE STUDY

John Lewis

THE JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP

The John Lewis Partnership operates 29 John Lewis shops across the UK (28 department stores and one John Lewis at home), johnlewis.com, 228 Waitrose supermarkets and Greenbee.com, a direct services company. The business has an annual turnover of over £7.4 bn. It is the UK's largest example of worker co-ownership, where all 70,000 staff are partners in the business.

John Lewis has a clear and unique vision of the type of employee it wishes to recruit:

'Our teams are as diverse as the products we sell, and we recruit people from many backgrounds. What unites all of us is our behaviour, which is based on our powerful and distinctive



Conclusions

John Lewis's methods reflect the company's size and ethos. It is currently trialling an online system to manage efficiently the large number of applications it receives. If the company does utilise this approach fully in the future, it will enable it to assess large numbers of applicants in a cost-effective manner. Systems of this type can offer a range of assessments, including numerical and verbal, and exercises which simulate job roles within a business. These assessments can produce a single score, making it simpler to judge and compare candidates. Successful candidates from online testing can then proceed to other forms of selection.

Partnership culture 'Powered by our Principles'. If you want to work in a company where you can be honest, give respect, recognise others, show enterprise, work together and achieve more, as well as being a co-owner, then a career with the John Lewis Partnership could well be for you.'

Source: John Lewis (www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk)

Application form

Applicants are invited to complete a detailed application form. By having all candidate information on one form, the company has fewer forms to manage, reducing costs and making accurate judgements more likely. Use is made of a variety of application forms, as the information needed will vary between roles. The chosen candidates proceed to:

The assessment centre

John Lewis's assessment centres comprise a series of exercises, some individual and some group based. These centres evaluate candidates' qualities against the company's requirements. These may include judgements on whether applicants:

- are able to be part of an honest and open culture;
- are team players;
- have vision and creativity;
- possess the potential to develop and become leaders; and
- are passionate about retailing and able to deliver results.

John Lewis has a number of different assessment centres, as the competencies and skills it is looking for in a candidate will vary.

The design of the tasks in the company's assessment centres is intended to allow it to pick candidates to meet its precise needs. For example, emphasis is placed on teamworking skills because teams are used across the organisation. Candidates also need to be able to thrive in the company's distinctive culture and to be passionate about retailing.

Selection methods are designed to ensure the best applicants are chosen at a minimum cost. However, this is an area on which spending can be productive in the long term. John Lewis has planned its selection procedure very carefully because it recognises the value of appointing the most suitable people. **TE**

