**The Habits of a Recruiter: Applying “The Habits of an Improver” thinking to a Recruitment Process**

**November 2016**

**Introduction**

Competency based interviews are in widespread use within the NHS in Scotland; possibly the predominant method for assessing interviewee aptitude to inform the decision to appoint. Underpinning the use of competency-based interviews is the axiom that successful past performance predicts successful future performance. There is undoubted value in this thinking. However it is also problematic in a number of ways, for both interviewee and interviewer. For example, interviewees may well possess a particular behavioural competence, but have not yet had the opportunity within their career to demonstrate that competence. For interviewers, the method relies almost solely on interviewee self-appraisal and reporting where there is a clear incentive appraise favourably. Interviewers tend to have few ways of verifying information given by interviewees (Martin, P & Pope, J. 2008).

Therefore there is a need to consider how to run a recruitment process that gives interviewees the opportunity to demonstrate aptitude, as well as giving interviewers ways to verify, support or contrast with interviewee self-appraisal. This is likely to be especially valuable in recruitment processes for posts which contain a high degree of behavioural (as opposed to technical) competencies. Additionally, reliability of self-assessment of competence alone is also known to be problematic.

Assessing behavioural competencies will always require a degree of subjectivity. The Habits of an Improver (Lucas, B. & Nacer, H. 2015) is a thought paper that considers the behavioural skills and knowledge that are reliably, habitually and observably in use in Improvement practitioners. The authors suggest 15 such habits are prominent in those who undertake quality improvement work.

A recent opportunity arose to construct and test a new interview process for an Improvement Advisor post within NHS Tayside. We were interested in how we might apply some of the thinking laid out in the Habits of an Improver paper, and so we decided to test a new recruitment process for this part of the organization to address the issues described above, and to use the “Habits” thinking to seek answers to the following questions;

1. Did the new process provide equal opportunity across all interviewees to demonstrate the attributes sought?
2. Did the new process enable verification of performance within the interview?
3. Did the “Habits” materials provide a useful framework for consistently undertaking direct observation and assessment of behaviours within the role play scenario?
4. Overall, was it worthwhile investing time in such an approach?

**Method**

1. The job description and person specification (job literature) for the post being recruited to (Improvement Advisor, AfC7) were reviewed and compared with the 15 attributes identified in the Habits of an Improver paper.
2. If a Habits attribute was identified within the job literature, it was deemed appropriate to test for. A total of 11 of the 15 attributes were identified in the job literature. As an aside, the attributes which were not present in the job literature were deemed to be important attributes to the job. Hence consideration is being given to refreshing the job literature to reflect all 15 Habits attributes.
3. Enquiries were made about existing recruitment processes and associated materials in the QI field that might enable testing for those attributes. Healthcare Improvement Scotland generously shared some of their recruitment materials for similar posts.
4. Using the available materials and evidence, a set of activities was designed that would allow for testing of the 11 attributes in addition to other important job components. The activities selected were:
   1. A 25 minute role play scenario of a typical situation a postholder might find themselves in
   2. A 30 minute exercise to produce a written report of the scenario
   3. A 10 minute briefing to the panel on the role play and written report
   4. A 30 minute competency-based interview.
5. Guidance for each activity and scoring materials were developed using the Habits attributes.
6. Staff supporting the process were trained in their part of the process, and the process was tested, refined and finalised.
7. Communication with each stakeholder, including interviewees, was then carried out.
8. The process was run
9. An after action informal review took place.

Appendix one contains the detail of the process and lists which attributes were targeted at which stages.

**Results**

1. Did the process provide equal opportunity across all interviewees to demonstrate the attributes sought?

Response: Yes.

Reasoning: All interviewees received the same information, in the same timescales, and were given access to the same materials and time, regardless of previous posts held. Assessment was based purely on observed performance within the exercises. In addition, neither the observer nor the actor saw the application forms of any of the candidates, and hence were not aware of either previous roles, qualifications or current posts held by the candidates.

1. Did the additions in the process beyond the competency-based interview enable verification of performance within the interview?

Response: Yes

Reasoning: The panel had 3 decisions to make regarding the offer of appointment. In each decision, the assessment from the role play scenario played a part – to varying degrees. Whilst each decision was arrived at using all available information (application form, feedback from the observer and actor, written brief and performance at verbal brief and interview, this paper specifically assesses the value of the **additional information** elicited by the role play, the written brief and the verbal brief.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Decision | Assessment from role play, written brief and verbal brief | Assessment at interview | **Added value** of additional information | Impact |
| 1 | Strong | Strong | Identified development need as part of offer | Low |
| 2 | Weak | Moderate | Identified major concern about a core capability of post that interview had not clearly picked out | High |
| 3 | Strong | Weak | Contrast in performance complicated and slowed decision making process, however chair confident with decision given additional information | High |

1. Did the “Habits” materials provide a useful framework for consistently undertaking direct observation and assessment of behaviours within the role play scenario?

Response: Yes – though challenging

Reasoning: There were pros and cons in taking this approach.

**Pros:** The materials provided the observer with a method to be attuned to, and identify, a set of attributes pertinent to the post, and enabled methodical organisation of observations made around key behaviours. Notes were recorded and scores were made against all 11 habits in each of the three cases. The extent of information gathered against each habit led to an assurance for the panel that the same style of observation was applied across all interviewees. The observer also highlighted the importance of not having had any prior knowledge of any of the candidates.

**Cons:** The observer was given examples of potential strong and potential less strong indicators for each habit in advance, and was instructed to make notes against all habits during the exercise before deciding upon at score for each habit at the end of the exercise. As a result, the experience of assessing for (in this case) 11 habits in the space of a 25 minute exercise was intense. The time required, and pressure to first prepare for the role, and to then undertake it including feeding back to panel made this role challenging.

Time commitment required beyond the traditional process is described in the following table.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Activity | Time Commitment **beyond** traditional process | Likely to be recurring requirement? |
| Review of job literature against Habits | 3 hours | No |
| Search & review of existing processes/ materials | 7 hours | No |
| Prepare materials | 75 hours | No – provided materials are restricted circulation |
| Staff time required to train up on process | Observer, 7.5 hours  Actor, 3 hours  Panel member, 1 hour  Chair, none if preparing materials | Yes |
| Staff time required to run process (3 interviewees) | Observer, 7.5 hours  Actor, 5 hours  Panel member, 1 hour | Yes |
| Total | 110 hours in total to get to this stage | Recurring time investment = 24.5 hours |

The total time commitment was substantial. However, many of the activities that were undertaken could be avoided if running again in future. The recurring time commitment is 24.5 hours to provide the additional information to the panel.

Overall, all panellists and contributors involved in the process felt that the additional effort and time was a valuable undertaking in reaching the decision in each case.

**Discussion**

The decision to appoint to a permanent post needs to be taken carefully. The cost of making the wrong appointment can be substantial both for the interviewee and interviewer alike, as well as for the recruiting organisation.

Within this part of the selection process, a panel must make the best decision it can based on all the evidence available. The amount and quality of evidence that is available to the panel, and the opportunities for interviewees to demonstrate aptitude, will be determined in large part by the selection process and the activities that comprise it.

A selection process should be constructed with consideration given to available resources and time, equality of opportunity consistency across interviewees, skills and knowledge of interviewers, and how to assess performance against the key attributes of the post being recruited to.

The process undertaken above was designed with these factors in mind. The panel was confident that a robust method had been followed and consistently applied. The panel also felt with unanimity that the additional steps over and above the competency-based interview added valuable additional information with which to verify or contrast interviewees’ responses at interview. This information was key in the decision-making process of the panel. Indeed, the additional information played a role in all three decisions, and in two of the three was high impact.

The role of the observer was pivotal in terms of consistently running the additional steps in the process, and consistently appraising each individual’s performance. Whilst there were many criteria to assess against using the Habits paper as a guide, the materials developed for scoring using the Habits of an Improver enabled the observer to clearly structure and evidence their assessment of each candidate’s performance in the exercise. The Habits assessed for were all observable. Indeed, there is perceived benefit in being able to assess against all 15 habits, so a review and revision of the post literature in question will be considered going forward.

As and when the need to recruit arises again, there will be opportunities to streamline the process and materials further to ensure that the organisation further strengthens its selection and decision-making processes around recruitment.

**Limitations**

This paper specifically addresses considerations after shortlisting has taken place and the offer of an interview has been made. Factors affecting which candidates were invited for interview were not considered.

It was not possible to compare efficacy of the process used with just competency based interviewing alone. Therefore, it is not possible to say that a different set of decisions would have been made without the additional steps in the process.

The overall process outcome can only be deemed successful once a candidate is in post. Even then, a range of factors such as level of supervision, size of workload, opportunities to develop, job opportunities elsewhere etc influence judgements about relative “success” or otherwise in post.

Scoring consistency on the part of the observer, and consistency on the part of the actor, was not tested in this process. Thought needs to be given to how best to ensure that these roles are consistently fulfilled in future similar processes going forward

Other frameworks may be useful in supporting observation of habits deemed appropriate for a given post.

**References**

**Martin, P & Pope, J.** (2008): Competency Based Interviewing - has it gone too far?, Industrial and Commercial Training Vol 40, Iss 2, pp 81-86

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**Kruger, J. & Dunning, D.** (1999): Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognising One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol 77, No 6, 1121-1134

**Appendix One: Full Business Process used in this test**

