



How Assessment Centers Were Started in the United States: The OSS Program

A monograph by Donald W MacKinnon

Review by Anthony Wilson

Some time ago my friend and colleague, Willie Marais told me about a little gem on Assessment Centres freely accessible on the Net. This is a fascinating 20-page monograph on the DDI website (Development Dimensions International Inc., founded in 1970 by AC pioneers, Bill Byham and Doug Bray). Go to www.ddiworld.com. You should not reproduce the monograph without DDI's permission.

The author, Dr. MacKinnon, a psychologist, was the Director of Station S, (1944-45) of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services - the precursor of the CIA – Central Intelligence Agency). The author quotes R. H. Smith saying that the activities of the OSS were “*espionage, sabotage, ‘black’ propaganda, guerrilla warfare, and other ‘un-American’ subversive practices.*” Station S’s purpose was to select personnel for the OSS; they did this through 3½ day ACs.

Reading through this monograph, written in 1974 and revised in 2005, I was struck by how fresh and creative the AC methodology and the materials seemed. *Plus ca change, plus c’est la meme chose*. What was lacking were thorough Job Analyses; the author notes “*nobody knew who would make a good spy or guerilla fighter*”. Some assumed that gangsters would be good at this dirty work. Early OSS missions in Italy with such people proved disastrous.

At Station S staff took the candidate’s Life History – a psychiatric history. They also used: a projective questionnaire- a sentence completion test, a health questionnaire, a Work Conditions Survey which listed 43 conditions which candidates were required to rate on a six-point scale ranging from “highly desirable” to “would make the job impossible”, the Otis Self-Administering Test of Ability, a vocabulary test, the Bennet Mechanical Comprehension Test and the Signal Corps Code Aptitude Test.

Many Industrial Psychologists today seem uninterested in (or perhaps wary of?) using measures of psychopathology. Yet who is not aware of the negative impact that, for example, bullies, “toxic” colleagues and narcissistic bosses with egos that constantly need stroking can have in the workplace. The psychologists at Station S had no such reservations or qualms. MacKinnon tells that the OSS recruitment process was attractive to those who were bored, “the pathologically adventuresome” and those “neurotically attracted to danger”. One of the dimensions assessed was Emotional Stability whose components were “emotional control and maturity”, and “absence of neurotic symptoms”. Another was Social Relations which included, “absence of annoying traits”.

Many of the dimensions used by MacKinnon and his staff would not be out of place in a modern AC, while others are clearly related to the job of the Secret Agent.

AC Dimension	Components
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy • Zest • Effort • Initiative • War morale • Interest in assignment
Practical Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed and accuracy of judgment • Resourcefulness in solving problems
Emotional Stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional control and maturity • Absence of neurotic symptoms
Social Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social awareness • Goodwill • Teamwork • Tact • Absence of annoying traits

Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social initiative • Organizing ability • Ability to evoke cooperation
Physical Ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agility • Daring • Ruggedness • Stamina
Observation and Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to search • [ability to] question, • [asking productive questions] • [following up leads and hints] • [ability to] observe and recall • [ability to] infer • [ability to] report
Propaganda Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to affect others through acts • [ability to affect others through] words • [ability to affect others through] or displays
Maintaining Cover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caution • Ability to remain inconspicuous • [ability to] bluff • [ability to] mislead • [ability to] keep a secret

I was struck here by the similarity between the concept of these AC dimensions and components and the Dimensions and Facets of the Saville Consulting Wave Professional Styles instrument.

Many of these AC dimensions and their components seem useful to us today. Take Observation and Reporting for example, the ability to search, question, observe and recall, infer and report. If we take ability to search in perhaps a less literal sense than MacKinnon's staff envisaged, aren't these the skills of the psychologist – or an AC assessor? Likewise for "Propaganda Skills" we might read "Influencing Skills". What excellent facets of Leadership and Social Relations we see here!

Station S scoring methods were straightforward and uncomplicated. If a candidate did well in a particular exercise the component was underlined, if poorly it was crossed out.

As you would expect, exercises were designed around the job of the OSS secret agent and give opportunities for candidates to demonstrate proficiency at specific dimensions. In line with today's best AC practice, exercises were designed to simulate situations, not replicate them.

Some exercises were designed specifically to measure one dimension. An example is the Belongings Test in which Observing and Reporting was measured. The candidate was taken to a bedroom and given four minutes to study 26 items placed around the room, such as clothing, written materials, a ticket receipt and so on. Next they completed a 36-item questionnaire designed to measure ability to observe and draw conclusions about the owner of the belongings.

The exercises and activities have intriguing titles:

Behind the Barn, Blown Bridge, Construction Test, Improvisations, Interrogation Test, Judgment of Others, Killing the Mayor, Liquor Test, Manchuria Test, Map Memory Test, Murder Mystery, Obstacle Course, OWI Test, Post Construction Interview, Post Construction Interview, Sociometric Questionnaire (post AC), Stress Interview, The Debate, The Wall. The author explains them and to find out more you'll have to read the article yourself.

In the Interrogation Test, the candidate had to interview someone playing the role of an escaped Prisoner-Of-War and was assessed in (among other dimensions) Developing Rapport, Asking Productive Questions, and Following up Leads and Hints. The author does not indicate the total number of dimensions assessed in this roleplay. MacKinnon goes into detail about the other exercises including giving the exact words spoken to the candidate.

MacKinnon says that Station S was "one grand simulation". As they began the AC, candidates were asked to make up a name and cover story. Their true name and story could only be revealed to staff other participants could only be revealed under, "X Conditions". One exercise, "The Stress Interview" ended abruptly with the interviewer saying, "We have abundant evidence that you have not been telling the truth. That is all." After a quick whispered conversation, the candidate was told by the examiner that they had failed the test. When they left the room, The Post Stress Interview took place (although the candidate was unaware of it). A sympathetic staff member would ask how it went. Many candidate broke cover at this point, forgetting that they were not under "X Conditions".

The author gives interesting insights into the design and execution of these early ACs. He also correlates candidates' scores with their actual on-the-job appraisal ratings, something we may not do enough today. Reading the monograph also made me want to read the with somewhat politically incorrect title book that MacKinnon quotes, "The Assessment of Men" published in 1948.

There's a lot more fascinating information in this monograph than space has allowed me to mention. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the monograph and can recommend it to you. Many thanks to DDI for putting this monograph on their website and to Willie Marais for alerting me to it.

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