This paper examines the perceived effectiveness of assessment centers (ACs) in Indian call centers from the experiences of the AC participants. Twenty successful and unsuccessful assessment center participants were interviewed. The major response was that the AC did not help in retention of talented customer care executives. Both successful and unsuccessful participants felt that the AC provides opportunities for growth. The majority of successful participants agreed that the exercises realistically captured the challenges on the floor.

Keywords: Assessment Centers, Employee Development, India, Call Centers

India has had the most rapidly expanding number of call centers in the world (National Association of Software and Service Companies, 2005). This reputation is built on the two million English-speaking graduates, many of whom can converse in English with fluency. Because of their high level of basic education, many of these employees find call center work to lack challenges after awhile. This may contribute to the high turnover rate frequently found in call centers (Holman, 2003; Schuler, 2002). To help make better decisions in selecting, promoting, and retaining support personnel, Indian call centers are adopting assessment centers (ACs). Most research about ACs has focused on their use as selection devices for managerial purposes (Thornton & Byham, 1982; Thornton & Rupp, 2004). Recently, ACs have been widely used as selection devices for front-line team leader selection in Indian call centers.

Statement of the Problem

High turnover rates simultaneously leading to performance issues in Indian call centers have led management to use ACs for selection and development of front-line team leader positions. The perception is that ACs will reduce turnover and increase performance through the use of correct selection and development processes (Marketresearch.com, 2005). Research relating to the perceived effectiveness of ACs for participants in the context of Indian call centers is limited, opening opportunities for research. The research problem is, how effective are ACs perceived to be as a selection method by successful and unsuccessful participants in an Indian call center?

Significance of the Study

The selection and development of team leaders in Indian call centers has long been conducted on a haphazard basis, relying on the experience, hunches, and biases of decision makers in organizations (Aron & Singh, 2002). An inquiry into the perceived effectiveness of ACs will aid in the development of a systematic promotional process for team leaders and identify the strengths and weaknesses of ACs from the participants’ experiences. This research provides a base of information from which models of evaluation, growth, and development of team leaders can be devised.

Literature Review

Thornton and Rupp (2004) defined ACs as “a method of evaluating performance in a set of assessment techniques at least one of which is a simulation” (p. 319). It is one of several methods available to select or evaluate candidates to predict for managerial success. ACs date to pre-World War II when the German military utilized a sophisticated multiple assessment procedure to select officer candidates. The British were the next to adopt the AC technique, used primarily for selection of military officers. The first fully developed AC program for selection and placement in the United States was probably devised by the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The practice of ACs varies across disciplines and settings and did not conclude its unification until 1975. In 1975, the International Congress on the Assessment Center Method, held in Quebec, Canada,
formed an international task force to develop guidelines for AC practice. These are the well-known Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations (Joiner, 2002).

Research on personnel selection traditionally has focused on understanding the process from the perspective of the organization (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). Studies concerning the validity and utility of selection techniques have demonstrated how organizations can benefit from valid selection tools. Studies have focused on personnel selection issues of the psychometric soundness of tests (e.g., reliability), the validity of inferences made with tests (Schmitt, Noe, Meritt, & Fitzgerald, 1984), the utility of selection procedures (Hunter & Hunter, 1984), and the fairness with which selection procedures have an impact on protected subgroups (Schmitt, 1997). Until the early 1990s, although all of these topics had been studied from a psychometric perspective, rarely had attention been directed to the social side of the selection process (Herriot, 1989).

Researchers have developed an interest in examining selection from the applicant’s perspective, recognizing that not only do companies select employees, but applicants also select the organizations to which they will apply and where they are willing to work (Rynes, 1993). Thus, as research continues with the goal of better estimating the predictive value of selection devices, a related concern is understanding how applicants perceive and react to the selection process. Early research on employee selection focused on either how well tests predicted future performance or how much utility they added (Gilliland, 1993; Herriot, 1989; Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Schmitt, 1997), rather than on applicants’ attitudes and reactions (Avery & Sackett 1993; Iles & Robertson, 1989; Lounsbury, Bobrow, & Braden, 1989). Several studies have demonstrated that objective standards of what constitutes fairness are less important than what is perceived as being organizationally just (Beugre, 1998; Sheppard, Lewicki, & Minton, 1992). Organizational practices and policies, including information presented during recruitment, may affect the attractiveness of an organization as applicants use them to signal working conditions within the organization (Barber, 1998; Turban & Greening, 1997). For example, recruiter attributes, such as friendliness, were associated with positive judgments about the organization, including fairness (Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995). Turban and Greening (1997) found that firms with higher corporate social performance ratings are more attractive as potential employers than those with lower ratings. From an ethical perspective, organizations should be concerned with the effects of selection procedures on the psychological well-being of applicants. For example, the perceived fairness of selection testing may influence the efficacy and self-esteem of rejected applicants (Robertson & Smith, 2001). Finally, from a legal perspective, the perceived fairness of the selection procedure may influence applicant’s decision to pursue a discrimination case.

In addition to these practical outcomes associated with the perceived fairness of selection systems, research in this domain can be of theoretical importance. Although few attempts have been made empirically to assess reactions to selection procedures, even less attention has been given to developing a theoretical model of these perceptual processes. Preliminary models of reactions to selection systems have been proposed (e.g., Arvey & Sackett, 1993; Schuler, 1993), but all of these lack a solid theoretical framework. A natural theoretical orientation that can be used to organize this area of research is that of organizational justice theories (Bauer, Truxillo, Sanchez, Craig, Ferrara, & Campion, 2001; Greenberg, 1993; Truxillo, Steiner, & Gilliland, 2004). Organizational justice generally involves the perceived fairness of: (a) outcome allocations (distributive justice), (b) rules and procedures used to make those decisions (procedural justice), (c) sensitivity and respect shown to individuals (interpersonal justice), and (d) explanations and accounts given to individuals (informational justice) (Greenberg, 1993).

The Indian Call Center Industry

Call centers have been one a booming service in recent years (Zapf, Isic, Bechtold, & Blau, 2003). According to NASSCOM (2006), the Indian call center industry was a key driver of the overall Indian IT software and services sector during 2003-2004, recording revenues of US$3.6 billion in that period. The Indian call center industry grew at about 54% during 2003-2004 (Datta, 2004). The main task of call center operations is to interact with customers by telephone, usually supported by computer systems. Call centers may be part of the company (in-house call centers) or external, usually working on behalf of several companies. Call centers may be in contact with customers in many ways. Whereas inbound call centers are restricted to a passive role (i.e., being called up exclusively by customers having questions or complaints concerning a product), outbound call centers actively engage in phoning people, e.g., telemarketing call centers. However, there are also call centers with both inbound and outbound activities.
This section discusses the assessment center process for ABC call center. ABC call center is a medium-sized domestic call center with approximately 4,000 employees. Ten ACs were conducted at the ABC call center for team leader selection between September, 2004, and the time of this study. Dimensions and exercises for the assessment process were identified by conducting a job analysis for the team leader position. A committee comprising the human resource manager, a team manager, and two external consultants met for two days to define the major duties of the job; assign the duties to management functions; and determine the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for successful job performance for team leaders.

The ABC call center incorporated the following eleven dimensions for the assessment process for team leader selection: clear communication, drive for results, timely decision making, customer focus, innovative management, managing vision and purpose, taking ownership, people's development, interpersonal effectiveness, withstanding pressure, and building effective teams. The AC process in ABC consisted of six job-related activities: the in-basket, leadership group discussion, leaderless group discussion, background interview, fact finding, and interview simulation.

Methods

This study used an embedded case study design. For the purpose of this study, ABC call center (a pseudonym) is the case under study. The objectives were within-case comparisons about typical cases of successful and unsuccessful AC participants for team leader positions through semi-structured interviews with twenty participants. Among the twenty participants, ten had been promoted to team leader based on the AC recommendations, and ten had not been recommended for team leader position. According to Patton, the purpose of interviewing is to "allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 287). This perspective includes the knowledge, experience, feelings, thoughts, and intentions of the other person. As a comprehensive strategy, the case study method allowed us to get detailed, in-depth data with which to answer the research question. The objective in case study research is not to study the case from the perspective of how it is different from other cases (Stake, 1995), nor are cases studied as representative samples of larger populations (Yin, 2004). Instead, the focus is on trying to understand the case from the point of view of what the case is, what happens in the case (Stake, 1995), and the dynamics present within the setting (Eisenhardt, 1995).

The interviews in this study followed a semi-structured format. The interview questions were designed to elicit responses that addressed the research questions. The interviews were designed around four central issues: (a) actual AC structure, exercises, and dimensions; (b) specific participant information and experiences with the AC; (c) information about the participant's views of the AC process; and (d) overall recommendations and suggestions for the AC.

The protocol for the interviews was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota. Interviews were conducted by telephone by the senior author, as she was still in the U.S. and the participants were in India. In all but one interview, the interviews were conducted in English and, with permission, were recorded and later transcribed. The themes identified were shared with the participants by e-mail to verify the accuracy of the interpretations.

Data Analysis

The analysis activities occurred throughout and following the data collection period as three concurrent flows of activity: (a) data reduction, in which the raw data were selected for inclusion; (b) data display, in which the case record was assembled into a narrative text; and (c) conclusion drawing and verification, in which meanings, explanations, and propositions were attached to selected texts. Following Miles and Huberman’s (1994) suggestions, data analysis for this study was a continuous activity starting with the participants’ interviews and collection of documents. The senior author transcribed each interview and completed transcriptions within a short time after each interview. Beginning the data analysis during data collection contributed to my ability to refocus or refine the original questions for future interviews. Completing the interview transcriptions allowed for immersion in the data. Transcribing also offered an opportunity to transition from interviewing into full analysis.

The organization and management of the data were crucial. All interviews were coded, with names, dates, length, and characteristics to identify the interviewees. A color coding system was used to begin highlighting important quotes, ideas, and phrases, as each interview was evaluated shortly after the interview was conducted and transcribed.
After the cursory analysis, summaries of the transcripts were sent to participants. This study relied on participants to verify the interview information. After participant feedback, the data were analyzed to identify common themes and patterns that addressed the research question.

Results

Table 1 depicts the themes that appeared most frequently across the 20 interviews; 10 interviews were conducted with participants who were selected for team leader positions through the AC process, and the other 10 interviews were with participants who were not selected.

The following conclusions drawn from the case studies offer information to support suggestions for improvement of the development opportunities of the AC in ABC call center. These conclusions can not be generalized to all corporations. Rather, they address specific AC experiences, as described by twenty participants within the context of this study. The following discussion and conclusions follow from this study.

Participant Orientation

One of the themes that emerged during discussion with participants was that ABC did not provide orientation to candidates regarding the AC process. Some participants were completely unaware of the reason for their participation.

AC and Retention

The current research found that participants remained with ABC on average for one and a half years, and discontent relating to work pressures and career development opportunities were manifold, particularly among participants who were not successfully selected through the AC process. High turnover rates simultaneously leading to performance issues led ABC to rely on ACs for selection and development for front-line team leader positions. The perception was that the ACs would reduce turnover and increase performance through selection and development processes. Additionally, ACs, it was thought, would aid in the development of a systematic promotion process.

Fairness Issues in the AC Process

Participants saw value in the AC process, but the perception of bias and infrequency of the ACs have led customer care executives (CCEs) to believe that management is not fully committed to conducting a bias-free selection and development process. Some participants stated that they knew the exercises prior to AC participation through assessors, peers, and team leaders, some of whom had already participated in the AC process. Participants also stated that there was favoritism among assessors towards participants whom they already knew.

Training and Development

The majority of participants presented training and development needs; successful participants suggested that there be leadership and product training after successful selection through the ACs. Unsuccessful participants suggested that there is a need for developmental feedback and one-on-one coaching sessions to boost morale and to present future opportunities with ABC.

AC-related Feedback

Several unsuccessful participants did not receive AC-related feedback. Research on AC feedback has demonstrated that, if ACs provide effective feedback, the potential for participants to be promoted to management positions will be improved (Howard & Bray, 1988; Jones & Whitmore, 1995; Klimoski & Brickner, 1987). The majority of unsuccessful AC participants did not accept their assessment feedback; on the other hand, the majority of successful participants did accept their feedback as accurate and as reflecting their true skills. According to Kenny and DePaulo (1993), when feedback to participants in a test is vague, unclear, or minimal, people have no choice but to base their perceptions on their own self-image.

Exercises in ACs

There was consensus among unsuccessful participants that the exercises did not capture the challenges on the floor. According to these participants, the exercises did not access the basic skills of the team leader position—product knowledge, process administration, or report handling skills.
Table 1
Frequently Occurring Categories for Selected and Not Selected Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>successful participants</th>
<th>unsuccessful participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation regarding AC process</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bias in AC selection process</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC and retention</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC and growth opportunities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC exercises realistically capture challenges on floor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final AC feedback</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training needed after selection</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility of the AC process</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns regarding salary based on salary differentials for those selected through an AC and those selected through the interview process</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for improvements</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should ABC conduct AC?</td>
<td>Yes- 9</td>
<td>Yes- 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No- 1</td>
<td>No- 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations follow for practice within ABC’s call center AC and for practice for ACs in general.

Provide Participant Orientation to the AC Process

One of the themes that emerged during participant interviews was that ABC did not provide orientation to the participants regarding the AC process. According to the guidelines for ACs in *Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for AC Operations, Updated and Endorsed by the 28th International Congress on AC Methods, 1989*, candidates should be fully informed about the AC process prior to the testing process. An AC requires detailed explanation of the process and carefully detailed knowledge of the dimensions being tested in the AC process. Candidates should have the opportunity formally to ask questions about the process.

Provide Adequate Assessor Training

The current research found that participants saw value in the AC process, but the perception of bias, favoritism, and prior knowledge of the AC process through assessors and peers has led CCEs to believe that management is not fully committed to conducting a bias-free assessment process. It is essential that assessors receive intensive training regarding the process of observing and classifying dimensions and behaviors and that they demonstrate skill in properly rating candidates (Joiner, 2002). This will enable assessors to stay focused on the AC process and conduct a bias-free AC process. In addition, assessors’ honesty and truthfulness in communicating decisions to the participants and their sincerity and believability can be addressed through adequate training programs.

Provide Training to Participants after the AC

Participants stated that there is a need for training after successful selection through the AC. The AC results for individuals can be viewed as snapshots of where the individuals were at the time, and the skill profiles of the higher level jobs can be viewed as targets for individual career development plans. ACs can offer the chance to establish individual training and development requirements, while providing candidates with greater appreciation of needs. Results can also be integrated with human resource planning data to provide additional resources concerning the number of people with particular skills needed in the future. Using ACs as
diagnostic tools to establish training and development needs, ACs can aid in the development of training programs focusing on leadership skills, teambuilding, quality, and technology skills for successful and unsuccessful participants; this will provide a clearer sense of direction and development.

**Provide Fair Assessment Processes**

The criterion of fairness needs to be applied to any AC. It is essential that steps be taken to ensure a fair, bias-free AC experience for the participants. The *Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for AC Operations* should be carefully read and thoroughly discussed prior to developing an AC. The *Guidelines* have been written to ensure that proper AC standards are understood and followed. In establishing in-house criteria for conducting ACs at ABC, it is important to adhere to the *Guidelines*. Although the *Guidelines* are not a guarantee that the AC process will be a success, a process that does not follow the *Guidelines* is not likely to be valid and predictive of success.

**Provide Detailed Feedback to All AC Participants**

Candidate performance feedback is the most common additional benefit of ACs. Participant information is very personal, and participants have a high degree of vested interest in the outcomes as a form of personal development. It is not the quantity of feedback that counts; it is the quality. The status and credibility of the feedback giver seems to be interpreted by the candidate as an indicator of the degree of importance attributed by the organization to him or her. According to the *Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for AC Operations*, participants should receive feedback on their AC performance and should be informed of any recommendations made. It is important that assessors provide open, spontaneous, and clear feedback, including negative feedback.

**Provide Clear Exercises in the ACs**

An explicit criterion for judging an AC should be the quality of the exercises. The exercises need to be consistent with the best current understanding of the field and, at the same time, reflective of what are judged to be aspects of quality that will stand the test of time. One strategy to assure content quality of assessments is to involve subject matter experts not only in a review of tasks, but also in their design (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991). Another way is through a job analysis. According to the *Testing and Assessment Guide* published by the U.S. Department of Labor (2003), a “job analysis is a systematic process used to identify the tasks, duties, responsibilities and working conditions associated with a job and the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics required to perform that job” (p. 37).

**Rotate Exercises**

A fair majority of participants said that they had prior knowledge of the AC exercises through peers and team leaders who had already participated in the AC. There were no changes in the exercises in subsequent ACs. Prior knowledge of exercises defeats the purpose of conducting an AC. An effective way of dealing with this problem is the use of an assessment design that systematically rotates exercises in and out of the pool from time to time so that participants are not aware of the exercises prior to the AC.

**Recommendations for Research**

Going forward, there are many opportunities for HRD to contribute to future research on ACs. The following recommendations follow for future research.

**International Role of ACs.**

In the North American context, ACs have been found to be good predictors of a variety of managerial criteria, such as job and training performance (Gaugler, Rosenthal, Thornton, & Bentson, 1987). Yet an unanswered question is whether ACs are also predictive if used in international applications. With expanding global markets, culturally diverse work teams, and expatriate work assignments, international and multinational organizations place new demands on selection processes and measurement tools. The validity of selection instruments like the ACs in the United States may not generalize to international sites because different behavioral constructs and dimensions may be relevant. ACs are very much an international affair today, as they are used around the globe (Byham, 2002; Kudisch, Avis, Fallon, Thibodeaux, Roberts, Rollier, & Rotolo; 2001) for selection and development purposes. Research reflecting ways in which national cultures and internal and external environments reflect the role of ACs is limited and open for investigation.
Additionally, ethical issues concerning the AC process are complex, context-specific, and relative to each culture in which an AC is conducted. Research pertaining to the ethical issues for a culture specific context is limited. Future research is needed in this area.

Multi-faceted Nature of AC Methods.
ACs may vary in a variety of aspects, such as the number and type of exercises used, the number of dimensions evaluated, the length and content of assessor training, and the methods for recording and observing behavior. There is a need for future research investigating the influence of other AC variations on the ratings obtained. Such variations in AC procedures may also affect the convergent and discriminant validity of data from the AC. For example, a small number of well-defined AC dimensions and intensive assessor training may result in improvements in construct validity for the dimensions (Byham, 2002). Future research is needed to examine the influence of these variations, as well as the method of evaluation, on the construct validity of AC dimensions.

Industry-specific ACs.
Greater conceptual and methodological attention is also needed to understand and predict how industry-specific ACs might change over time, e.g., the use of ACs in service industries versus production industries. Given the present and future state of rapid change in the world of work, this line of research is critically important for improving personnel selection and overall organizational effectiveness.

Use of ACs for Non-managerial Positions.
Historically, ACs have been applied most frequently to managerial jobs ranging from supervisors to executives. More recently, they have been used to access a wider range to include non-managerial jobs. An investigation into the effectiveness of ACs for non-managerial roles is limited and opens opportunities for future research.

Optimum Utilization of ACs as an HRD Intervention.
Although content and criterion validity studies in the literature have confirmed that AC is a valid mechanism to access behaviors, unfortunately, research in HRD has not paid enough attention to this important area. It may be, for example, that ACs are not sufficiently cost-effective to warrant their broader use. Studies of ACs to enhance their effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and accountability are limited, opening opportunities for research.

The role of HRD professionals is to diagnose training needs, engage in developmental counseling, and make connections with relevant training. ACs may be a mechanism to help HRD, particularly in the design of training assessment, moving from cognitive or reactive assessments toward behavioral assessments—possibly a more reliable measure (Chen, 2006). The AC method is an excellent diagnostic tool for HRD because it separates an individual's abilities into specific areas (dimensions) and then seeks specific examples of good and poor behavior within each dimension. This helps the assessor determine more precisely what training and developmental activities are required. Additional research is needed to study the use of ACs as an HRD tool to develop training programs and to support career planning and organization development.

Enhance Generalizability of This Case Study.
The scope of this study is not generalizable to other corporations. Rather, it addressed specific AC experiences, as described by twenty participants within the context of a case study. There is a need to conduct a similar study on a broader scale, so the results are more generalizable. Future research with a longitudinal design may provide valuable insight into the questions regarding generalizability and the long-term validity of the AC. Quantitative methods could help to discover information on questions of retention, performance, and future promotion for AC participants. Additionally, judicious case selections of a similar nature across various industries may result in more generalizable research. For example, studies relating to selection of team leaders through the AC process for information technology and international call centers industries in India may lead to generalizability. Moreover, if this case research is replicated many times, generalization of case-based findings may be possible.

Inclusion of Participants Who Have Left the Organization.
In this case study, no effort was made to contact those who had participated in an AC and had then left ABC. Their insights might have added a different perspective and been very useful in understanding the
implications of the AC practices in this case study. Future research might, therefore, find it useful to contact participants who are no longer with the organization.

References


