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## Strength-based assessment: a different lens or something new?

*An interview with Howard Grosvenor explaining how strength-based assessment changes the way we assess, but why it does not change the fundamental nature of what we assess.*

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## Strength-based assessment: a different lens or something new?



Howard Grosvenor is Professional Services Director at *cut-e*. An HCPC-registered Chartered Occupational Psychologist with over fourteen years industry experience designing, implementing and leading talent management and assessment projects for clients large and small, Howard draws on his experience and knowledge of assessment in this interview.

He provides an overview of strength-based assessment and how it can add value to an organisation's talent management activities as well as highlighting how strength-based assessment changes the **way** we assess, but not the fundamental nature of **what** we assess. Howard is a well-respected and published Occupational Psychologist.

### **Strength-based assessment is being talked about on the assessment scene, but what exactly is it?**

Strength-based assessment looks at the combination of what people are good at and what they enjoy doing. It focuses on the specific areas which motivate, naturally enthuse and excite candidates. This term 'strength-based assessment' does seem to have come to the fore recently, coinciding with the growth in a more candidate-centric approach to selection and development. That said, we are not talking about a different type of assessment – all high quality and robust assessment can give the user an indication of the test taker's strengths – but offering an alternative approach to how assessments are used and how one provides feedback to candidates.

### **In what way is this different from other approaches?**

If performance in a role is equal to 'motivation x capability', then strength-based assessment operates at the coincidence of these two aspects, i.e. focusing specifically on the things someone is not only good at, but also that they enjoy doing. This is different from other approaches that consider the capability and motivation aspects separately.

What this means from an assessment point of view is, for example, that we look to change the questions we use at interview as well as how we ask those questions, so that we identify only those things that the person is both good at **and** that they enjoy.

To be clear, this is a difference in style and deployment of assessment rather than a fundamental shift in what we are interested in: we are still talking about problem solving, selling skills, customer focus etc., but we want to know if the person is both enthused about these areas as well as being able to do them.

Having identified someone's strengths, these are then either matched to the particular attributes required for a given role (in the case of selection) or considered in the context of current and future roles vis-à-vis how the person can maximise the use of their strengths (in the case of development).

In some cases where a strength-based approach is used in selection, the strengths of the candidate in relation to the overall strengths of the team in which they will be working, is also considered as this can then help to maximise the strengths of the team as a whole.

### **What impact does this have on the assessment situation?**

This focus on the positive isn't completely new. Pinpointing and highlighting the areas of strength against what a business requires – the competencies for the organisation – is how questionnaire, assessment and test results have been interpreted and discussed since the introduction of such tools into the world of work. The difference is one of focus: highlighting the strengths rather than the gaps for development.

By focusing on someone's strengths, the candidate experience of the assessment process can be more enjoyable, and likewise for assessors. In both selection and development settings, one is helping participants to steer themselves towards work that will enthuse and inspire them, and where they are likely to positively contribute to the organisation.

## **And what are the potential downsides?**

There is somewhat of a risk with a strength-based approach that not focusing on areas for development can lead to gaps in the talent profile of the organisation. Further, in some cases the talent assessment process ends up measuring a broader range of areas than is actually required by the organisation, risking a focus on the irrelevant.

There is also the question of where a strength-based approach leaves someone who has few absolute strengths. Leading organisations adopt a blended approach that leverages the advantages of a strength-based approach in how assessment is deployed, but also uses other approaches and techniques.

## **So, is this something which requires new assessment questionnaires and tests?**

A strength-based approach is a different lens through which you see your candidate or employee. You're looking for those who would be naturally great at the job – and would be energised by it.

The input on the assessment side is often the same – e.g. Group Exercise, Case-Study, Personality Questionnaire, Interview, Ability Test, Situational Judgement Questionnaire; it's how the assessment is deployed and the way in which the results are used that has a different emphasis. This is one of many approaches we at *cut-e* discuss with our clients and help them adopt.

## **Why are organisations adopting this approach?**

The strength-based approach fits well with the growth in interest in Positive Psychology and the understanding that people who use their strengths every day are more likely to be engaged in their work and to say they have an excellent quality of life.

With the much-talked shift in employee attitude to career progression and development – and a desire for a more individualised approach to their employment, strength-based assessment puts the focus on the natural strengths and enthusiasm of the person and looks at how best to utilise these within the job role or across the organisation. Such an approach fits well alongside those wanting to adopt a more candidate- or employee-centric approach to their talent management.

## **How does this work in practice?**

For personality assessment, we believe that our customisable *shapes* assessment remains one of the most useful tools on the market. For those clients wishing to adopt a strength-based approach, we have a specific Interview Guide Report in which strength-based question prompts are given for the interviewer to use.

It takes the responses from the *shapes* questionnaire, compares the profile of the likely strengths against those strengths that are required for success in the job and then offers interview questions to validate these.

As noted above, the way in which questions are asked in the feedback interview is different to other types of feedback or interview. The aim is not to probe too deeply – but to observe where the natural motivation and excitement for specific areas comes through.

## **Are core competencies still important?**

Yes, whether you talk about 'strengths', 'competencies', 'behaviours', 'attributes' or something else, ultimately what you are describing is that which makes someone good at a job, more satisfied, more motivated, and more productive.

Organisations still need to understand who has these attributes. A strength-based approach focuses on the intersection between being good at these aspects and also enjoying and being motivated by them.

**Can you tell us a little more about how an organisation has adopted this form of assessment?**

We have worked with one large, multi-national client in developing a job navigator tool capable of being used by anyone of working age.

This isn't a recruitment or selection tool - it has been developed to support job seekers and to showcase the organisation's career options and training programmes - but it is very much based on highlighting to the test taker the areas of strength he or she holds.

It indicates clearly to school leavers what they are good at, where their strengths are and suggests a training programme they may like to apply for. It can be accessed via the corporate website, and whilst it doesn't form part of the selection process, it does help candidates decide if a career in this company meets their personal strengths and plus-points.

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