

# SELF ASSESSMENT AND REALISTIC JOB PREVIEWS IN COUNSELLING FOR OCCUPATIONAL ADJUSTMENT

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## Abstract

Most recent reviews of the value of Self Assessment in industrial and organisational settings concluded that the self-assessment motive will prompt people to seek information to confirm their uncertain self-concept rather than their certain self-concept and at the same time people use self-assessment to enhance their certainty of their self-knowledge. Major criticisms concern the excessive leniency apparent in Self Assessments and their poor accuracy. This article reconsiders the available literature. ;with respect to leniency. It is suggested that leniency is common to all ratings, that there are individual differences in leniency and that degree of leniency is influenced by perceived consequences to the assessor. It is also argued that accuracy may be influenced by the purpose of the assessment and the extent to which the assessment is based on immediate experience rather than recalled, hypothetical or vicarious experience. Ways in which self assessments might be effectively used are suggested and the conclusions are discussed within the context of a four-component framework for the self assessment process.

## Introduction

Self-assessment is a polymorphous concept because its meaning depends on a particular context as well as content. An Educationist, Asuquo (2005) regarded assessment as a multifacetal process that involves several procedures used in collecting information. He emphasized that the exactness of the measuring process, objectivity of the procedure and purpose to which its products are put, are what determine whether or not an activity is assessment. Ojerinde (1997) viewed self assessment as a process of estimating the nature, quality, value or worth of something while Ikpala, Onocha and Ayedeyi (1993) defined self-assessment as the process of organizing measurement data into interpretable forms on a number of variables. Such data are usually obtained through a wide variety of measuring instruments from various sources. Therefore self assessment can be considered as the process of ascertaining the level of teaching and learning objectives using multifacet measurement procedures. Self-Assessment can be classified into two categories – School based and External based. Assessment carried out by teachers within a school is called school based assessment while the one carried out by agencies such as West African Examinations Council (WAEC) or National Examinations Council (NECO) is regarded as External Assessment.

The self-assessment methods are believed to have the potential of matching the skills students acquired in school to the kinds of tasks which they would likely need to succeed in their future life. In self assessment, students are positioned to perform, create, produce or do something that requires time to use higher-cognitive level and problem-solving among others. These represent meaningful instructional activities which are relevant to their real-life task. Self-Assessment is broad-based and does not only concentrate on assessing logical and verbal abilities but also on visual, auditory, unaesthetic, intra-personal and inter-personal abilities.

### **Self-Assessments**

Self-assessments at work have been receiving a very “bad press” in recent years. For example, Thornton (1990) concluded his review of the psychometric properties of self-assessment as follows:

“This inescapable conclusion of this review is that individuals have a significantly different view of their own job performance than that are held by other people, rather than improving their self-view, this makes self-assessment possibly the only way self-evaluative motive that may cause a person’s self-esteem to be damaged”.

Reilly and Chao (2006) reviewed the literature on self-assessment with particular reference to personnel selection. They came to the conclusion that the psychometric and validity problems associated with self-assessment means that as far as personnel selection is concerned, it “cannot be re commended as a promising alternative.

Despite these depressing conclusion however, at a personal level, it is apparent to us all that we are continually making assessments of our own characteristics among behaviour and making decision based on these assessments. If these were as widely inaccurate as the evidence would seem to suggest, our working lives would surely be more of a mess than they already are, with unresolved superior or subordinate conflict. The purpose of this paper therefore is three fold.

- 1) To re-examine the literature and see if, like the optimist, the bottle can be described as half-full instead of half empty.
- 2) To describe some of these factors that might account for the observed differences between self-assessment and other forms of assessment and
- 3) To suggest ways in which self-assessment might be applied more effectively.

Levine, Flory and Ash (1997) suggested that there is a lack of interest in self-assessment because of three assumptions: firstly, that individuals will inflate their estimates of their own skills, abilities or knowledge; secondly, that individuals cannot make accurate or reliable self-assessments and finally, that because of the first two assumptions, the validity of the self-assessment will be

very low. These three factors, leniency, accuracy and validity are examined in details below:

### **Leniency**

Most subordinates tend to underestimate their personalities and achievements. McGregor (2004) concluded that all other researchers in the same area showed that consistent overestimates in self-assessment, a notable exception being Heneman's study, and "comparison of self and superior Ratings of Management Performance" Leniency according to Mchregor (2004) and others hold across several levels of employees for both trait and behavioural ratings and for job related and person-related dimensions, these are openly confirmed.

There is a general tendency in self-assessments to be more lenient with certain groups. This tendency in leniency however, is not unique to self-assessed ratings and can be reduced by training. In many cases, the training may be replacing one response with another. Experts have suggested that one of the reasons for leniency in supervisors' ratings especially when desire the supervisor to avoid the unpleasant consequences that presumably surround discussion of a poor rating.

Support for this interpretation for the leniency affect in self assessment comes from Heneman who worked on "Comparisons of Self and Superior Ratings of Managerial Performance". He suggested that the reason for the lack of leniency effect in his study was that it was made clear to all the participants that the data were totally confidential and would be used for research purposes only. Meyer (2001) however suggested that the opposite effect occurs especially in Self Assessment quoting work by Parker (2003) and Bassett (2008) Meyer suggested that publicly announced appraisals tend to be more modest than those given in confidence.

Although there would appear to be a discrepancy between these two explanations, there seems to be little doubt that the leniency effect is common to rating in general and not just self assessment rating. Besides, the magnitude of the effect can vary and seems to be influenced by similar factors. In particular, whilst there is some disagreement as to whether public disclosure increases or decreases leniency, it is apparent that the consequences arising from the use to which the ratings are to be put affects the raters. Supervisors were behaving defensively and people were defensive of their self image of modesty but it might also be that the knowledge that the ratings were to be usefully used led to a more accurate concentration on the rating process. It would appear therefore that more concentration has to be given to the circumstances in which the rating takes place and the expected consequences to the rater. Teel (2007) in a somewhat anecdotal report on his own experiences as a Counselling Psychologist reported that of 24 self appraisals over a period of years with his subordinates, the subordinate invariably estimated themselves lower than his rating. He suggested that one of the possible reasons for this is that the subordinate was likely to receive praise in

the discussion of the discrepancy. Thus, it is not merely disclosure or lack of disclosure which is important, but the circumstances in which the disclosure is made. It might be reasonable to expect that the level of leniency increases the longer the rater and ratee have been acquainted. Given the length of this relationship in self assessment, it is perhaps surprising that the effect is not larger than what was observed.

### **Individual Differences**

It has been observed that the leniency effect is a general characteristic of self assessment but there are some individuals for whom the effect is more pronounced. The amount of leniency varies and is shown to be more pronounced amongst older employees who were dissatisfied with their pay, those considered not to be promotable and those who were rated lower performers by others but who had high self esteem. In the rating of others, there also appears to be individual differences between raters which may be masking more useful results. For example, Bernadin and Buckley (2005) when discussing strategies in rater training suggested that it might be useful to identify those raters who were “idiosyncratic”. Indeed, if leniency was a constant phenomenon, it would be possible to take account of it and merely apply a correction factor to each self assessment. From the literature therefore it appears that:

- 1) Leniency is common to all ratings not just self assessment;
- 2) That self raters and other raters show individual differences in the extent to which they exhibit leniency;
- 3) The amount of leniency is affected by the perceived consequences to the rater whether it be self or others.

### **Accuracy and Validity**

The second assumption quoted by Levine, Flory and Ash (2006) concerned the accuracy and validity of self assessments. The criteria used in order to assess the validity of self assessments have included objective measures of performance such as survival and commission levels for the assurance agents but majority of studies have used supervisory ratings. Other studies of self assessment have concentrated on particular abilities and these have generally used standard tests as the criteria although some have used performance tests. For example, Ash (2007) used various performance tests in order to test the typing skills of “business ready” high school students.

### **Supervisors Ratings**

The level of agreement between self assessments and assessment by supervisors varies quite widely. Levine (2006) used self assessed abilities. Of the 13 possible correlations, only seven were significantly related to the criteria. Ekpo-Ufot (2003) in a study of junior workers in a government ministry reported correlation of 0.23 ( $P < 0.01$ ) between self and supervisor-rated performance.

William and Ufot (2005) however used both global and dimensional ratings of effort and performance obtained from both self and supervisor. Whilst the correlations between both global and dimensional measures of effort were low (0.24 and 0.33,  $P < 0.01$ ), those for performance ratings were 0.48 and 0.60 respectively ( $P < 0.01$ ). As Thornton (2000) reported, the variety of the findings is such that no conclusions can be drawn other than perhaps, to note that at least, all the relationships were in “right” direction. If the supervisors rating is considered to be the criterion, this is perfectly acceptable but perhaps, we should not lose sight of the fact that they can also be considered as inter-rater reliabilities and when viewed from this perspective, the range and level of various correlations are more understandable, (Bassett and Meyer, 2008).

### **Objective Criteria**

Ekpo-Ufot (2003) used a measure of “complaining behaviour” and found a correlation of 0.30 between this rating and self assessment ratings. More commonly however, ability measures have been used. DeNist and Shaw (2002) for example, compared self assessed abilities with tests of those abilities and reported ten correlations out of twenty four that ranged from 0.05 to 0.40, Levine (2006) as well as using supervisor ratings also used the objective tests and reported a similar range from 0.03 to 0.58 with a median of 0.36 ( $P > 0.05$ ). Primoffs (2007) also reported a similar range but the lower correlations were with less familiar abilities while those that might be expected to carry out the exercise are biased. It is important from many of these studies that the accuracy of self assessment is affected by such factors as the extent to which the dimensions of the ability being assessed are well understood and familiar. Indeed, Primoffs (2007) has suggested that the correlations between self assessment and other variables is affected by the extent to which the self raters and those who prepare the test have a common understanding of the behaviour statements and also the extent to which self raters have a common base for their ratings.

Commenting on the lack of a theoretical basis for self assessment, Heneman (2007) considered Primoffs (2007) suggestions to be a contribution towards establishing such a theoretical base, but once again, it appears that the factors that are important in self assessment are also important in other studies of rating. The need for a common understanding of both the dimensions to be rated and of the various anchors on these dimensions has been behind many schemes for rater training and the development of such method as Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS). Indeed, the development of BARS is an attempt by means of rater participation in scale construction to reduce the effect of what Makin, and Randall (2005) have called “problem of meaning”. Heneman (2004) has also pointed out that the dimensions used in most studies have been imposed by the researchers, a factor which again, will tend to reduce the accuracy of both general and self assessment ratings.

It can be seen therefore, that any form of rating unless the rater keeps it totally to himself, is part of a social process and it is subject to the influences inherent in any social interaction. As a social act, self assessments can be seen as an act of “self disclosure” in a situation which is usually of major importance to the individual and hence “ego involving”. Self disclosure in general, is fuller and more “accurate”, the closer the relationship between the people involved the Counselling psychologists and their clients. Thus, there are greater revelations to counselling psychologists through self-disclosures. A similar form of detachment and confidentiality is that researchers hope to gain accurate self-assessment from their subjects. It is unlikely however, that they can sustain this impression. People especially in industries realize that the researcher must have a reasonable relationship with management in order to be allowed to pursue the research. In majority of the case, the management gain directly and indirectly from the research. Perhaps those who are asking people to assess themselves rather than expecting accuracy because of the promise of confidentiality should also seek to establish a trusting relationship with the subjects.

Although the influence of perceived consequences may be important with all forms of ratings, it is likely to be of greater importance in self assessment where the consequences are probably more significant, not least because of the greater involvement of self image and self esteem. The inclusion of a factor which is concerned with the anticipated consequences of rating procedure will also go some way to answer Heneman’s suggestions that we should look at the effects of rating system itself on the ratee and also with Tenopyr and Oettjen (2002) also agreed with other reviewers that there has been too much emphasis on the rating format and not the process of rating and appraisal.

### **Occupational Choice and Self Assessment**

As previously mentioned, self assessment is an integral part of occupation decision-making process. Therapy to apply for a job and if it is offered, whether to accept or turn it down all involve some self assessment and a comparison of counselling psychologists own abilities, experiences and preferences with the requirements and characteristics of the job on offer. Inevitably, this matching is sometimes not as efficient as might be hoped, resulting in labour, turnover and cost to the organisation and the individual concerned.

### **Realistic Job Previews**

In an attempt to reduce such turnover, Realistic Job Previews have been used in an attempt to improve individual’s knowledge of the job characteristics and requirements. In their recent study Reilly, Blood, Brown and Malesta (2009) used two types of job previews, a film and a job visit in an attempt to influence the turnover rate of telephone service representatives. The results were all negative. There was no significant difference between acceptance rates, met

expectations, job commitment or turnover for any of the groups. These findings at variance with the conclusions of Wanous (2004) and others led Reilly and his colleagues to review other independent studies. They found 11 out of 21 which met their criteria and by pooling the data, reported significant differences in turnover across all studies and also, when the jobs were more complex. They concluded however that Realistic Job Previews are unlikely to be useful in self selection especially when the jobs are at relatively low level. Indeed their only advantage is in communicating a favourable organisational image. This view is supported by Tenopyr and Oeljein (2002) who suggested that the main objective of Realistic Job Previews should be to take discussion of job characteristics out of the employment interview.

Almost all the quoted studies, however, used vicarious rather than experiential methods of job previews normally using audio-visual, booklets or in a few cases, a job visit or talk with a current employee. The assumption in such methods of Realistic Job Previews however, is that the applicant has a realistic assessment of his own abilities and that the main purpose of preview is to provide knowledge concerning the nature of the job. As argued earlier however, the accuracy of self assessment (other things being equal) is increased, the greater the level of experiential knowledge. Perhaps, the most realistic form of previewing a job would be a period actually set aside for the job the job and indeed some employers do offer a probationary period most notably in universities and in the Armed Forces respectively.

### **Work Sample Tests**

A more limited form of previewing the job through experience of it is perhaps gained through trainability or work sample tests. The efficacy of such tests as a selection technique has been demonstrated in a range of studies, Robertson and Downs (2006) and Robertson and Kandola (2006).

As Downs, Faru and Colbeck (2008) pointed out, the emphasis in these tests has been the classic selection approach with little attention being paid to experience of the subject, although in their recent review Robertson and Kandola (2006) considered the evidence on applicants reaction to such tests. DeNist and Shaw (2002) reported the use of a test for sewing mechanists each applicant being graded A (highest) to E (lowest) in terms of their assessed trainability. Fortunately and perhaps rarely, the candidates were not selected on the basis of test performance and job offers were made to all candidates. None of the candidates was informed of his assessed performance on the test. Of those who were assessed A, over 90 percent took up the job offer and started, of those assessed D, slightly over half started, whilst of those assessed in the lowest grade E, less than a quarter (23.1 per cent) started. Using as a theoretical basis, Bern's theory (2002) of self-perception. DeNist and Shaw (2002) suggested that individuals by using the same ones as the assessors, makes a self- assessment similar to that of the assessor. The method used by Downs and her colleagues

does not allow us to identify whether the reason behind the rejection of the job by those poorly assessed was due to a change in the individual's self assessment or whether it was due to a change in their expectations concerning the job itself. The relatively simple nature of the job in a traditional factory environment would have a reasonably good idea of the job and that it was the feedback provided by the test that affected their self assessment. It is interesting however that of the 1134 applicants, the number of those rated below the suggested cut-off rating of C was only 92 or eight percent. As Sheppard and Belitsky (2006) suggested, it might be that the selection by self assessment took place at the time of the decision to apply.

The evidence suggests therefore, that accuracy might be improved when self assessment is based on experience and that if the consequences are seen as relevant and important to the person concerned, this will also influence the assessment produced or at least, will influence action taken on the basis of the assessment.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Turning to the processes involved when self- assessments take place and drawing heavily on the ideas of Levine (2006) and Bandura (2000), it is possible to propose that the following four components form the basis of the self-assessment process:

- 1) **Self-Observation:** The individual observes his or her own behaviour;
- 2) **Judgment:** Having observed performance, the individual is now in a position to evaluate it.
- 3) **Self-evaluation:** At this stage, the individual is able to make some "self evaluative reaction which can be positive, neutral or negative and
- 4) **Reporting:** (Self-disclosure) This is the stage where reports of self-evaluative activities may be passed on to others.

When other assessment rather than self- assessment is taking place, it is evident that the process can be divided into four similar components, that is, observation, judgement, evaluation and reporting. On this basis, self and other assessments do not involve different basic processes. The main difference rests on the fact that in one case, we are examining ourselves and in the other, someone else is the focus of our attention.

During the observation and judgment phases of the process, it is possible that (in general) researchers will make more lenient observations and judgments of their own behaviour than the behaviour of others. This is likely to be particularly true if the judgment is based not on immediate observations of behaviours but on recollections of previous behaviour or predictions of future behaviour. This would be the case, for example, with traditional job preview when the applicant is the passive recipient of information about the job and the

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job requirements. If however, the job preview is experiential and provides the applicant with an opportunity to observe his or her own behaviour in a realistic setting, then the observational and judgmental phases of the assessment process may produce more accurate assessment. Similarly, the accuracy with which could assess others would be affected by the opportunities available to observe relevant behaviour. The differences between self and other assessment and the beneficial effect that direct experience may have on the accuracy may be related therefore to the observation and judgment components of the assessment (although further research is needed to support or disconfirm these tentative suggestions).

However, it is not only during the first two phases that accuracy is influenced. The evaluation and reporting phases are also likely to be important since the personal and psychological impact of assessments are likely to be much more significant when the object of assessment is oneself and as research described earlier has suggested, the purpose of assessment is likely to exert an effect on reported assessment of both self and others.

### **Conclusions**

Self assessment is not different from other forms of assessment, it is affected by the same variables and can be improved by manipulating these variables.

Self assessment will be affected by the level of experiential knowledge of the performance or ability to be assessed and

The accuracy of reporting of assessments and in particular self assessment, will be influenced by the perceived consequences of that reporting. Assessment, except in very rare cases, is a social action involving the experts' relationship with others.

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