

August 31, 2010

Profiles International: A Multifaceted Approach for Assessing Talent

About the Author



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Introduction

Throughout the process of talent management (e.g., recruiting and selecting candidates, assessing performance and potential, developing people, and implementing rewards programs), there is a common and critical thread – the need to assess people. Thanks to extensive research and many innovative solution providers, the market for assessment tools has exploded. Today, companies are using a wide variety of assessment tools to screen and assess candidates, uncover strengths and weaknesses, determine job fit¹ and leadership potential, and identify specific development needs that drive success.

Profiles International, a world leader in selecting and developing high-performance workforces, offers a comprehensive suite of employment assessments that help companies gain a competitive advantage by selecting, hiring, retaining and developing great talent. Continually validating and updating its assessment products, Profiles serves many of the largest companies in 122 countries around the globe.

Types of Assessments

There are many different kinds of assessments on the market today, including competency, personality, potential and team effectiveness. Assessments can be conducted on paper or online, and are completed via self-assessment or multirater.

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¹ "Job fit" refers to the assessment of current knowledge, skills, competencies and other key qualifications of an individual against the requirements of a specific role, current or future.

Two of Profiles's flagship assessments are:

- **Profiles's "Checkpoint 360™"** – Multirater feedback process that assesses employees against 18 competencies grouped into eight skill clusters; and,
- **Profiles's ProfileXT™** (assess job fit, job interests and potential):
 - o Measures thinking style, behavioral traits and occupational interests,
 - o Compares candidates to job-specific patterns to predict future success,
 - o Improves quality of hire, and
 - o Provides a foundation for ongoing employee performance management.

The Application of Assessments

The application of assessments in talent management programs is varied. In the following sections, we briefly highlight the function of assessments within each of the core talent management processes.

- **Recruitment and Selection** – To maximize talent investments and "upgrade" the talent pool, organizations need to rethink their current strategies – and make the necessary changes to not only reduce costs, but improve the accuracy and quality of hires. Assessments can be fully integrated into a recruiting solution, so that candidates are screened before they are brought in for an interview.
- **Performance Management** – Each year, managers must go through the difficult process of assessing employees' performance against a set of performance goals, as well as required or desired skills and capabilities. Often done via a 180- or 360-degree assessment, these tools indicate standards against which to measure employees. Skills



KEY POINT

Potential assessments are used most often for senior leaders and executives, by 22 percent and 29 percent of companies, respectively.²

² For more information, *Leadership Development Factbook® 2009: Benchmarks and Analysis of Leadership Development Spending, Staffing and Programs*, Bersin & Associates / Kim Lamoureux and Karen O'Leonard, October 2009. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/ldfactbook.





KEY POINT

Companies use job fit and potential assessments to evaluate employees against future roles.

gaps are identified and development plans are put in place to close these gaps.

- **Career Management** – Career management addresses the career goals of employees. Companies employ assessments, such as job fit and potential assessments, so that employees are able to measure themselves against future roles.
- **Succession Management** – Succession management is a critical part of any talent management strategy. Companies use assessments to predict the future capabilities and potential of its employees. With this information, companies create succession plans and build a leadership pipeline³ that will enable the company to endure through the retirement, departure and termination of its leaders.
- **Leadership Development** – In a recent study of more than 350 companies⁴, we found that 360-degree feedback, leadership style and personality are the three most common assessments for managers, regardless of level. Overall, assessments are more frequently used for senior-level leaders, likely due to associated costs. Assessments help define the critical skills necessary to drive organizational performance.

Conclusion

Assessments are no longer just for executives. Companies are using a variety of assessments for every level of employee and at all key phases of the employee lifecycle. These tools help employees to become more self-aware and enable employees to develop career goals that are obtainable. For companies, assessments help leaders make better selection decisions, uncover skills gaps to drive learning priorities and build capabilities necessary for long-term sustainable growth.

³ “Leadership pipeline” refers to an organization’s ongoing need to have a pool of talent that is readily available to fill positions at all levels of management (as well as other key positions) as the company grows. At each level, different competencies, knowledge and experiences are required, and (to keep the pipeline filled) the organization must have programs designed to develop appropriate skills sets. (Also known as the “leadership bench.”)

⁴ For more information, *Leadership Development Factbook® 2009: Benchmarks and Analysis of Leadership Development Spending, Staffing and Programs*, Bersin & Associates / Kim Lamoureux and Karen O’Leonard, October 2009.



Appendix I: Case Study



ANALYSIS

The way in which a company manages its talent has become a critical business lever and will provide companies with competitive advantage.

Sitel: Mining the Full Value of an Assessment

Sitel is a privately held global leader in business process outsourcing (BPO). The company is especially well-known for providing customer-care call centers and complementary back-office services; it also provides customized solutions in the areas of sales, technical support, risk management and collections. Headquartered in Asheville, North Carolina, Sitel operates more than 140 onshore, near-shore and offshore solutions facilities in 27 countries, including about 40 sites in the U.S.⁵

Essential to Sitel's success is the ability to maintain a workforce able to meet the high expectations of a clientele that runs the gamut from financial institutions and healthcare providers, to manufacturers and government agencies, and beyond. The company (which has roughly 60,000 employees worldwide) invests a lot in its associates to ensure that they have ample subject-matter expertise and superior people skills. The HR department at Sitel estimates that new hires go through several weeks of training, therefore, excessive turnover can significantly increase the cost of doing business.

To help avoid that problem, Sitel set out to find a partner – and began a relationship with Profiles International. Today, all of Sitel's operations make use of the ProfileXT®⁶ (PXT) and, to support that, the vendor has helped to develop 400 to 500 ideal profiles for various positions across the enterprise. But the Sitel site in Asheville, North Carolina stands out for its work to get the most possible value from the tool, exceeding expectations with results in not just pre-hire screening, but in employee development and succession management⁷. This case study focuses on the Asheville site.

⁵ Source: http://www.sitel.com/downloads/corporate_profile.pdf.

⁶ The "ProfileXT®" is a multipurpose assessment often used in the pre-hire screening process. It helps companies to develop a profile of the ideal candidate for a position, and compares profiles of actual employees and candidates against this profile.

⁷ "Succession management" is a strategic and systemic process for creating successors at many levels of the organization, including non-managerial roles. Succession management refers to an organization's processes for identifying, selecting and managing successors, as well as the processes of career planning and talent migration.



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Sitel's Path to Profiles International

Some years ago, it became clear to leaders at Sitel that recruitment models typically used at other companies did not quite suit its needs. The varied expertise that Sitel requires of its employees and its preference to consider each applicant for multiple positions are a couple of the factors that make the company unusual.

Also, Sitel had encountered cases in which applicants professed certain skills sets (*and may have even actually had skills in what seemed to be the right categories*), but nonetheless proved a bad fit for their positions. So, in roughly 2003, Sitel opted to try looking at more than just competencies, broadening its pre-hire screenings to look at personality and behavioral traits.

Largely through the initiative of one particularly interested executive, Sitel found Profiles International. Given the company's underwhelming previous experiences, decision-makers were understandably cautious. They visited Profiles's headquarters in Waco, Texas to learn more about what this latest vendor had to offer.

Implementation from the Top down

The corporate group that went to the three-day training session in Waco included the HR manager for Sitel's Asheville site. The travelers not only studied Profiles's approach, they took assessments themselves. Although there had been some skepticism at first, the group finished the trip eager to introduce the ProfileXT® to the Asheville location.

As the HR manager recalled,

"Quite frankly, when someone brings you a new software tool, the first thing you think is, 'Oh, brother, another thing we've gotta learn ... and do we even have time to deal with this right now? But when I went to that training and saw the reasoning behind the tool and, of course, the science behind it, along with some of the results of how it worked after we took the test ourselves – it really helped me to come back with more of a story behind it, not



**KEY POINT**

Sitel has found Profiles International to be ready and able to look into any questions that have arisen along the way, as well as to suggest ways to adjust the tools or their usage to ensure concerns are addressed.

just, 'Here's what we're doing.' And I think that's critical to implementation."

First-Hand Experience Informed the Process

Next, members of the HR team and all senior staff took the assessment. That experience and the discussion that followed, regarding the accuracy of their scores, what was reflected about their personalities, and how they could use those insights in working together, were key steps.

Critical thinking about the accuracy of assessment tools is important for any company that is looking to use one to guide decisions that will affect individuals' livelihoods and the future of the enterprise. To be lax on that step in initial implementations or in the ongoing validation of the tools would be irresponsible. Sitel has found Profiles to be ready and able to look into any questions that have arisen along the way, as well as to suggest ways to adjust the tools or their usage to ensure concerns are addressed.

As one HR representative commented,

"We were really able to see right from the start that there was quite a bit of merit to the tools ... I really like to see for myself, versus what a company wants you to think."

Identifying Top Performers

Ultimately, all employees would complete assessments, but next in line for the assessment were new hires and top performers. A composite "ideal" profile would next be developed against which job applicants could be measured. But how does a company identify its top performers for an initiative like this? Sitel handled the question thoughtfully, aware that missteps here could threaten the success of everything to follow.

Senior leaders met monthly during this stage of implementation, which began with gathering statistics on employees and ranking them. Supervisors then invited top performers to be assessed, making the request an honor. The test itself was given onsite, where HR staff could explain its purpose and address any concerns.



★ BEST PRACTICE

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In deciding which top performers to include for the composite profile, decision-makers ruled out those whose scores were seen as anomalies. They reasoned that those who had scored extraordinarily high on, for example, the learning index (a measure of how quickly a person learns) might skew the ideal, causing applicants with lower but ample aptitudes to appear less well-suited for a job.

How Sitel Uses the ProfileXT®

Sitel Asheville uses the PXT in three primary contexts – pre-hire screening, employee training and development, and succession planning.

Pre-Hire Screening

Sitel's business model and approach to hiring create some peculiar needs when it comes to developing and implementing assessment tools. For example, many companies judge job candidates in terms of their qualifications for only one job at a time. Sitel prefers to gauge each applicant's suitability for multiple positions at once and then set the applicant on a path toward whichever position seems to be the best fit.

To serve that preference, multiple reports are generated from each applicant's assessment, measuring his / her results against the profile for all relevant open positions at a given location. Given Sitel's business model, the relevant open positions can be quite diverse. For example, clients of Sitel's Asheville site include a bank, a healthcare provider and a credit-card company. Multiple lines of business within the site serve each client in different ways. The healthcare provider alone receives help with calls from healthcare practitioners, Medicare inquiries, and questions about billing and enrollment.

That means a greater number of ideal profiles is tapped regularly for Sitel operations than what is typical for other companies. At the Asheville site, the number is seven. Across the company, the number ranges from 400 to 500.

When someone applies to work at Sitel in Asheville, the application is first reviewed by someone in the HR department. If the candidate meets the minimum requirements, he / she is invited to the site to learn more about the company. Then, if the applicant is interested, he / she will be invited to take the ProfileXT® assessment.

**KEY POINT**

Sitel trainers have learned that extreme aptitude gaps in a group can make it hard to set a pace for learning that is appropriate for everyone.

PXT results are generated quickly enough for a hiring manager to discuss findings with the applicant during the same visit and specify which job is expected to be the best fit. The assessment is designed in such a way that the hiring manager can get a sense of whether the applicant's answers to similar questions have been consistent. Inconsistency or distortion can suggest that an applicant has tried to tell Sitel what he / she thinks will help to land the job.

Before the interview, the hiring manager can refer back to the assessment results and use them to tailor an approach that pinpoints areas of distortion, as well as areas in which the applicant's profile deviates most from the ideal. Interviewers use standardized questions, but emphasis in an interview can vary for this purpose.

Learning and Development

If a candidate is hired, he / she goes on to training and PXT results are considered at this stage, as well. Trainers receive copies of assessment results, in addition to guides for interpreting them. Also, trainers participate in what Sitel calls "Friday-before" meetings in advance of each group training session.

These meetings are forums for discussing what the assessment has indicated about each applicant's training needs and how that might affect a particular session. For example, awareness of a training group's particular mix of learning styles might lead a trainer to adjust his / her technique. Low scores on the learning index might signal a need to bring in an additional trainer to provide extra help. Trainers have learned that extreme aptitude gaps in a group can make it hard to set a pace for learning that is appropriate for everyone.

Assessment results also are used after training sessions. For example, if conduct problems arise with a particular trainee (*or with any employee*), Sitel officials might examine assessment results for any indication of whether the problem stems from core behavioral or personality traits. If that is the case, it can be a red flag that problems are likely to continue throughout employment. If not, the problems might be attributed to circumstances that will pass or an issue that can be addressed with coaching, which can also be guided by assessment results. If problems are traced to a characteristic on which an employee's score deviated

from the ideal profile, the situation can prompt an adjustment in how that characteristic is weighted in future hiring decisions or can reinforce the importance of considering such deviations.

An HR representative said,

"We've tried multiple times to make a liar out of the assessment. But time and time again, it has shown that it is credible – extremely credible. And we've hoped that it wouldn't be sometimes, when we've wanted to take a chance on hiring someone, but unfortunately it was right, and I wasn't."

Succession Management

Sitel has found that PXT results can offer a great starting point for discussions of employees' potential for promotion and for identifying the development needs of high-potential⁸ employees who want to advance. Because the assessment is part of the hiring process, this discussion of possible career paths can begin very early in the employment lifecycle – as early as the initial job interview. It can also be revisited during performance reviews to encourage motivation, and to guide goal-setting sessions between an employee and a supervisor.

Assessment results can also offer a tie-breaker when it is time for tough choices regarding which employees to promote. For example, Sitel Asheville's HR manager noted a recent situation in which two employees were considered strong candidates for a single higher-level opening. In terms of past performance and other criteria, the two were tied. But a check of the employees' assessment results revealed that one was a better fit for the position.

Leaders at Sitel appreciate the help assessments offer with what otherwise might be more subjective decision-making. While subjectivity cannot be eliminated entirely, a science-based tool can help to ensure



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⁸ A "high-potential employee" is an employee who has been identified as having the potential, ability and aspiration for successive leadership positions within the company. Often, these employees are provided with focused development as part of a succession plan and are referred to as "HiPos."





KEY POINT

Leaders at Regus have found the PXT to be a great tool for helping to ensure that hiring decisions propel the organization toward its goals in a focused way.

that standards of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission⁹ are met, and job candidates and employees are treated fairly.

Results

Sitel Asheville has reduced its 30- and 90-day attrition goals by five percent each, and still continues to meet these goals every month. Sitel Asheville's Q1'2010 attrition rates are on track for another successful year.

Figure 1: Attrition Improvements at Sitel Asheville

	2008	2009
30-day goal	15%	10%
90-day goal	18%	13%

Source: Profiles International, 2010.

These improvements are a direct result of the hard work and focused action through which Sitel sought out, selected and implemented the right solution.

⁹ The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. It is also illegal to discriminate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit.



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