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Upgrading graduate assessment through effective partnering

Over the past few years, Asda has chosen to upgrade its graduate assessment approach by collaborating with Strengths Partnership and introducing a greater strengths focus throughout the process. By adopting a strong partnering approach, and addressing the challenges of introducing this new approach, Paul Brewerton, Joint Managing Director at Strengths Partnership and Jane Kidd, Resourcing Manager Strategic Projects at Asda show how they have been able to achieve some excellent outcomes in terms of quality and longevity of graduate hire.



Three years ago, Asda recognised the need to upgrade its graduate assessment solution in order to showcase the Asda culture as robust, valid, fair and unbiased, while at the same time getting under the skin of candidates to uncover the real person rather than just what they think they should be.



Asda wanted to identify candidates with the right strengths for the role and the Asda culture, who would go on to perform well in the role and be fast tracked to a management position after the 3 year programme. It was also recognised that this was an opportunity to align its people processes, improving the connection between the recruitment method and the onward graduate journey.

Asda sought out a partner to help support this shift in approach to graduate recruitment and identified Strengths Partnership, who they felt would provide both a robust solution and a collaborative style, based on previous experiences of working with the company. Early meetings between the project teams focused on clearly understanding the context and aims of the Asda business - present and future, gaining a clear understanding of each other's strengths and capabilities, as well as getting to know each other at a personal level.

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graduates who, with the right support, could quickly step up into managerial positions, embody the Asda values and culture and who would love coming to work every day.

Strengths Partnership undertook a robust, valid strengths job analysis for all roles identified. This involved spending time running interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, focusing on current business needs, as well as taking a 'future-focused' approach, thinking forward by three to five years as to how Asda's operating context may change, future skills gaps and how graduates hired now would need to respond to these challenges in the future.

This approach ensured that the upgraded assessment process was built on strong foundations, but also that it would be easier to gain buy-in from senior stakeholders to the new approach. Stakeholders could see that the research was well-conducted and that it fairly reflected the current and future needs of the Asda business.

Once the strengths job analysis was complete, the team designed a strengths-based video interviewing sift stage, as well as designing strengths assessment centres which included exercises such as a strengths career presentation, a strengths interview, an analysis/role-play which mirrored the realities of the role as well as a group exercise. All of these elements were tied clearly to the 'what great looks like' profile, which meant that the assessment team could be confident that they would gain a better quality of hire from first time out.

Finally, the decision was taken to provide all candidates with feedback, including their Strengthscope® profiles (the strengths assessment psychometric used at assessment centres). This would demonstrate the Asda values and culture as well as serving to differentiate the candidate experience, as candidates would gain real knowledge and insights into their own strengths and risk areas, which would be useful to them whether or not they were successfully hired onto the graduate programme.

The outcomes

We reviewed outcomes from the assessment centres in a variety of ways, including candidate satisfaction, recruitment efficiency, business satisfaction and ultimately business growth/financial impact.

Our evaluation showed that candidates left the assessment day having gained insight into their strengths and risks, and gained personal development. Candidates provided very positive feedback on their experience and the extent to which the new approach demonstrated Asda's culture and values.

As regards to other improvements, candidates hit the ground running in their new roles. Additionally, all graduates stayed with the company and all were promoted quickly, meaning that their contribution to the business was significantly enhanced.

The process was seen as fair, unbiased and robust. Hiring manager feedback was positive, as shown in the quotes below:

"We have a high calibre of individuals coming through"



"The candidate has the opportunity to talk about things that are more business oriented during the assessment centre. It has been a real positive experience as an observer - we are able to make the most of people's strengths and where they fit in the business."

"We have some great stories from the last couple of graduate intakes. One graduate joined the business in 2014 and is now accountable for a £300M category of products, following back-to-back promotions. We also have another who is the General Store Manager (GSM) of a £Multimillion store, becoming the youngest Asda GSM ever."

The project continues, with the assessment centres undergoing regular reviews to ensure that they remain fit for purpose as the Asda trading context changes over time.

Our tips for effective partnering

Take time to get to know each other's strengths and challenges - for Strengths Partnership, this included spending time talking to a number of key stakeholders to understand the business and its current and future challenges at a deep level. For Asda, this involved coordinating a number of suppliers who were supporting the project in order to get the best from all parties, including

encouraging them to partner with each other, as well as with Asda. This enabled the team to develop a solution which was right first time for the business, as well as building a convincing business case for stakeholders who needed to be brought over to a new way of assessing.

Be honest and open - there were times during the project on both sides when we hit challenges but a vital principle was to continue to have open and straightforward communications throughout, telling each other if we were coming up against problems and working together to overcome them.

One example was arranging briefings for hiring managers who would be assessing at the assessment centres. Due to managers being based across the UK it was a challenge to get them briefed in a way that would lead to accurate assessing, while recognising they are time-poor, so can't spend a full day in a training room. Together, we designed a webinar-based briefing approach, as well as providing support during the assessment centres, to ensure that assessors were taking a robust, reliable and fair approach.

Clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities - we found that it was very important to operate to strong project management principles, being clear who was responsible for what and by when, and keeping each other informed if timescales slipped or if there were any changes to scope, checking in with each other regularly on progress against milestones and deadlines, to make sure that we met the rollout dates.

Have fun - we always ensured that we had fun and laughed together, even when the pressure was on. This helped us to keep the partnership strong and friendly even during the tougher moments of the project.