



**“We shall test them...”**

Assessment Centres in cultural contexts

> Building Pride



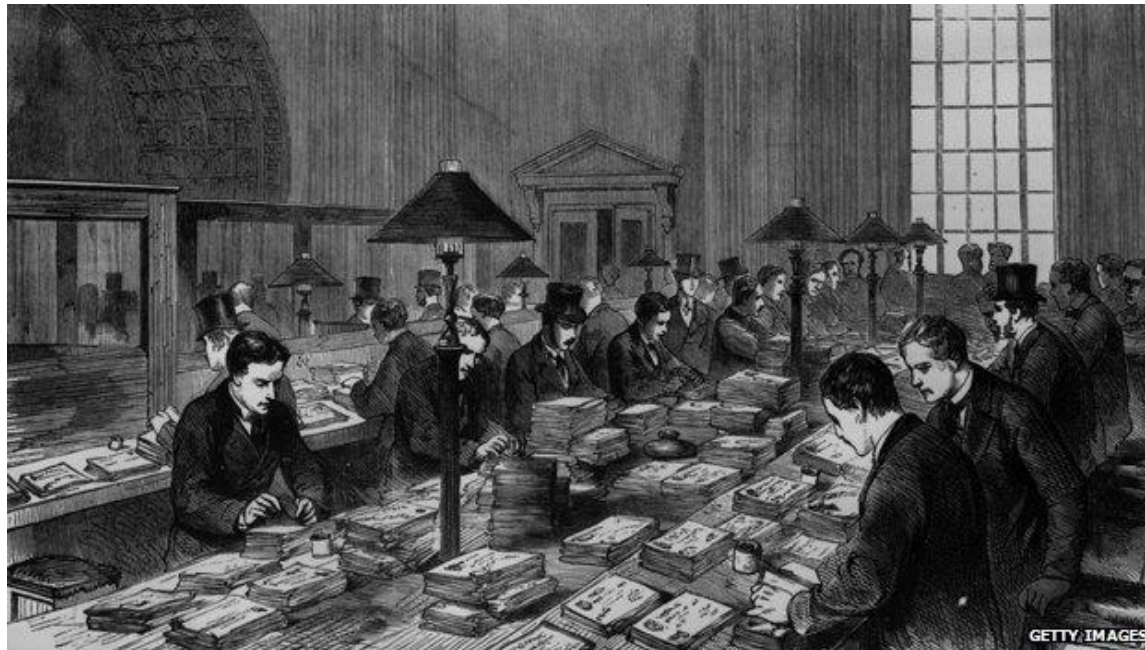
# A timeless invocation



...Then it will be our duty to select, if we can, natures which are fitted for the task of guarding the city?



A cascading series of dawn-to-dusk tests for which applicants had to memorise 400,000 characters of Confucian text and master the fiendishly rigid "eight-legged essay"



The British Civil Service. A meritocracy of young men that were selected on basis of academic brilliance in Mathematics or Greek.

# Conflict: The birth of the modern AC



1927. Zentrale Prüfstelle für Offiziersanwärter, dem Psychologischen Laboratorium beim Reichswehr



1938. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Officer Selection Board (OSB)



1940's. Aircrew Selection

# Thought Leaders



*“Psychology becomes significant only when the diagnosis provides important information for the state”* Max Simoneit, Department of Psychology of the Wehrmacht, 1938.

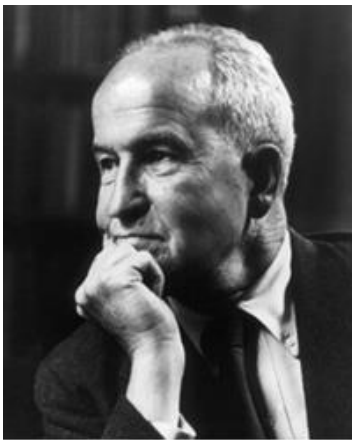


Photo: Harvard University Archives

Henry Murray from Harvard University had worked with OSS selection and in 1938 consulted with the British Government on establishing the Officer Selection Board. His research informed later developments on management effectiveness and commercial assessment centre methodologies



1950-70: Longitudinal study of predicting  
management performance





# Cultural Variance: A sample of factors

## Compliance

- Standards, jurisdictions, aspirations, norms and quality

## Power Distance

- High and low power distance variables

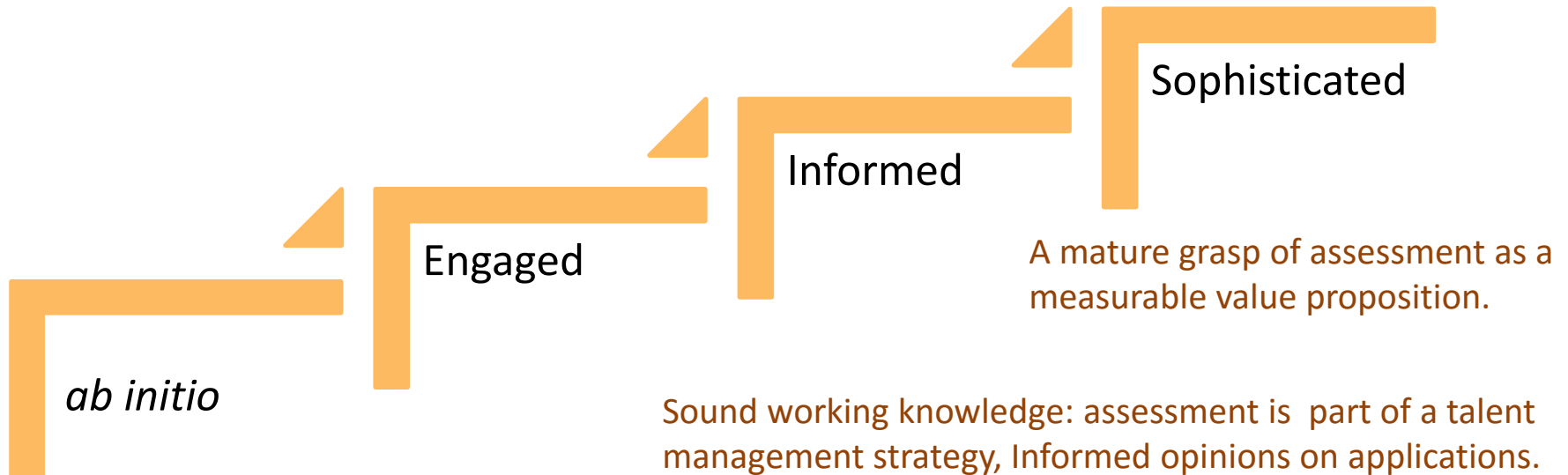
## Candidate Management

- Cultural issues on candidate contact and feedback

## Stereotypes and biases

- Literacy on culture, gender, religion and history

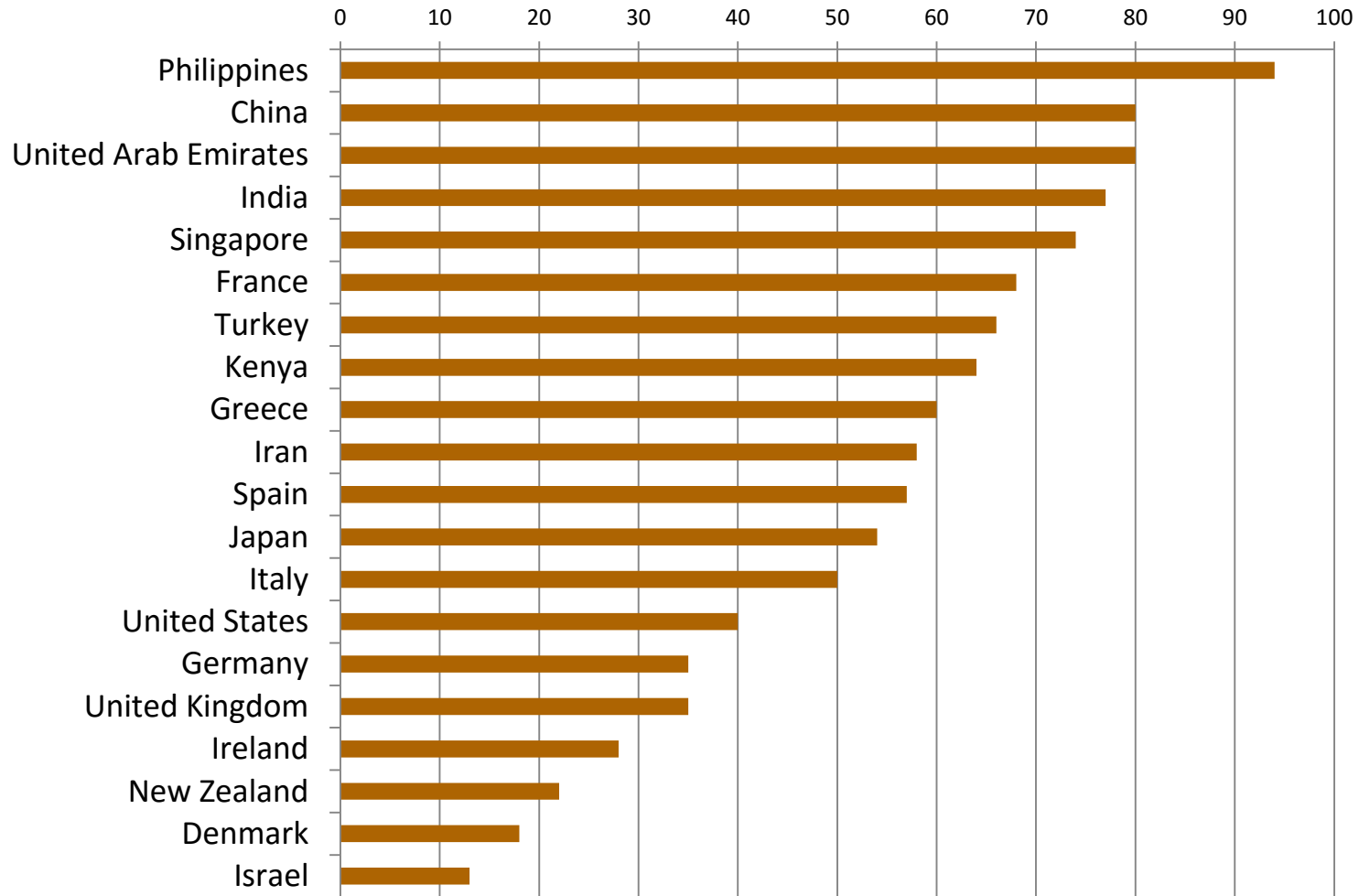
# Assessment Capability Maturity



Emerging knowledge, planned applications of assessment.  
Assessment is integrated with HR or recruitment Plan.

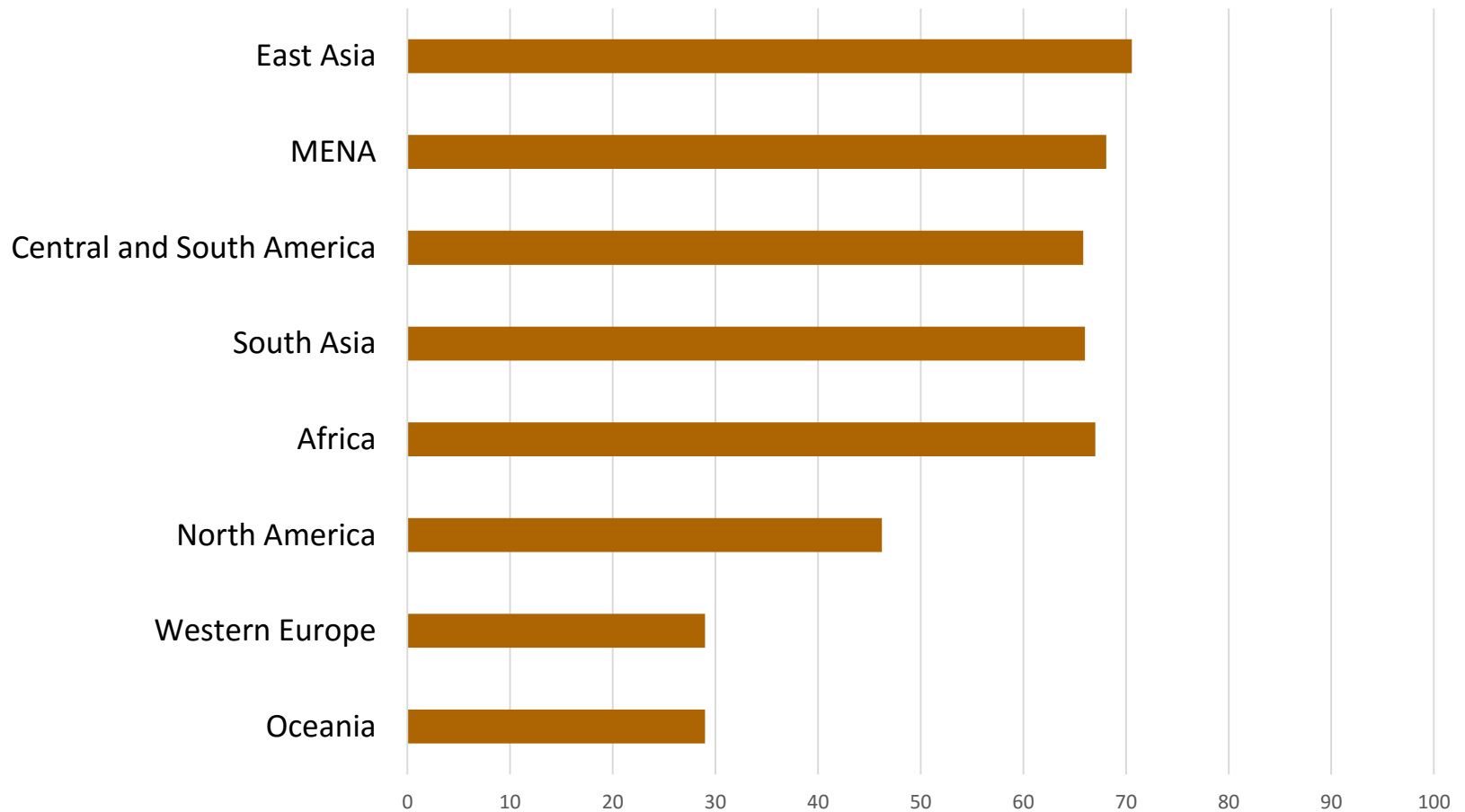
Education and service delivery in equal part. A wide spectrum of experience and expectations. Application planning is variable. Boundaries can be unclear.

# Power Distance Index<sup>1</sup>



1. [www.clearlycultural.com](http://www.clearlycultural.com)

# Power Distance Diversity<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup>. *ibid*

# Emerging research on Conscientiousness and Culture



- A 2012 study<sup>3</sup> of 2,965 people across 20 countries found that wealthier countries with longer life expectancy tend to have lower average conscientiousness.
- The research also found systematic differences between nations in people's proclivity for extreme responding on personality scales.
- Wealthier East Asian countries tended to avoid extreme scores, while poorer countries in Africa and SE Asia tended to give more extreme ratings.
- The researchers suggested one factor could be dialectical thinking. Countries whose cultures favoured dialectical thinking, would be expected to avoid extreme scores. Dialectical thinking is higher in East Asian countries and they were found in this study to refrain from giving extreme scores.

3. Möttus R, *et al.* **The Effect of Response Style on Self-Reported Conscientiousness Across 20 Countries.** *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*,. 2012

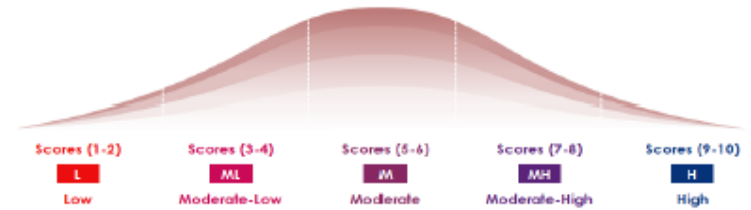
# Sponsorship and Change



- Engagement of leaders is critical to the introduction of assessment centre methodology.
- In first world environments assessment has been an accepted practice for many decades and sponsorship is helpful
- In emerging economies, leadership endorsement is absolutely critical as in almost all cases assessment initiatives are as much about culture change as they are about selection or development decisions. Two of my case studies bear this issue out.

# Norms

- Valuable for
  - Validity
  - Authenticity and Credibility
- Requires access to data and ownership of data
- Norms need to be developed from samples of a 'suitable size'.
- The consensus of mainstream test developers suggest sample sizes of between 300-500 is desirable, but samples as few as 100 have been used.



# Language and Ability

Multi lingual environments present specific challenges of comprehension and perception.

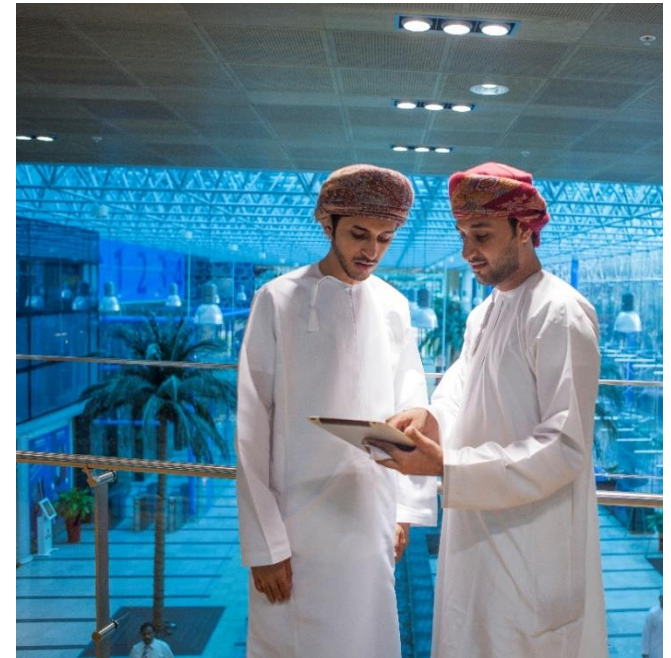
- Context is everything
- Remote assessment challenges
- A common ESL challenge - numeracy tests in English are typically also verbal tests
- Administration and reporting





# Feedback

- “Yeah I did one of these assessment things a few years ago and I never got any feedback...”
- Language and clarifying understanding
- The assessments and not the decision making
- Managing Ethics vs. Client expectations
- Learning mindsets
- Power-distance effects of the teacher, coach, feedback provider



# Use of information

- The core principle: Information may only be used for the purpose for which it was gathered.
- Shelf-life
- PDF
- Confidentiality
- Who owns the information?
- Security



# Case Example 1: Operational Leadership selection



- Oman Aluminum Rolling Company, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman
- Selecting local Nationals for shift leader roles



**Assessment Centre:** Nineteen (19) candidates

- Psychometrics (Ability, Personality and Situational Judgment)
- Group problem solving
- Leaderless tasks
- Employee meeting simulation
- Management Situations

**Cultural Considerations.** Detailed job descriptions not specified. Wide variation in English language ability required interpreters tolerance of delivery in Arabic and closer observation of candidates. Mixed nationality managers as Observer/Assessors

**Results.**

- Eight (8) selected
- Only one failed to pass subsequent training
- Developed reporting formats in Arabic

\*Supplementary case

# Case Example 2: Beginning the journey toward merit based selection



- The Asian Development Bank, Manila, Philippines
- Selecting a Country Manager for Vietnam



**Assessment Centre:** Ten (10) candidates assessed.

- Psychometric assessment (WGTA)
- Panel interviews
- Group Exercise
- Media Exercise
- Individual Exercise
- Candidates present Country briefs
- Candidates Feedback

**Cultural Considerations.** Political maneuvering, multi-cultural power distance effects. Significant effort on agenda building, safety, confidentiality, context and FAQ. As much a change management initiative as an assessment centre

**Results.** Four (4) Staff recommended for Executive panel decision. Political outcome

# Case Example 3: Leadership Development in the New Zealand Ministry of Fisheries



- Ministry of Fisheries, Wellington, New Zealand
- Developing Operational Change leaders



MINISTRY OF FISHERIES

Te Tautiaki i nga tini a Tangaroa



**Development Centre:** Twelve (12) participants.

Personal style questionnaire

Group Exercises (2)

Inbox Exercise

Interview role play

Staff resignation role play

Ethics scenario role play

Staff performance role play

Presentation

'The gift of feedback'

**Cultural Considerations.** Low power-distance, informal egalitarian culture, mature and experienced candidates = experience respect. Use of Actors.

**Results.** Progressive feedback resulting in individual development plans. Establishment of assessment as part of the leadership and culture development within the Ministry

# Learning



1. Cultural literacy is critical to introducing assessment practices in a multi-cultural, ESL or emerging economy environment
2. Developing local/regional norms assists validity and credibility
3. Readiness and capacity to work with assessments and reporting in different languages
4. Interview techniques need to respect cultural protocols
5. Readiness and capacity to blend service delivery with education and change management
6. Review assessments, simulations and exercises to ensure that the content and language is appropriate
7. Ensure that training for assessors includes issues around fairness and avoiding discrimination

## **BPS guidelines:**

- Good Practice in Psychological Testing and
- Design, Implementation and Evaluation of Assessment Centres