

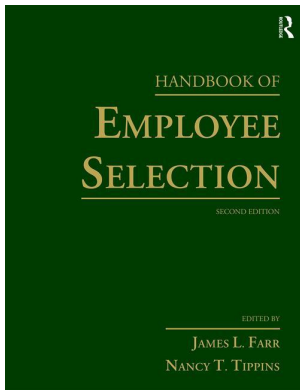
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## Handbook of Employee Selection

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### Selecting Leaders

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## SELECTING LEADERS

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### Executives and High-Potentials

GEORGE C. THORNTON III, STEFANIE K. JOHNSON,  
AND ALLAN H. CHURCH

Despite the importance of leaders at the senior-most levels of organizations, there has been relatively little research on executive selection. There is a large literature on leadership concepts (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu, 2014) and leadership development (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014) but surprisingly little empirical research on selecting leaders into top-level positions. Although selection in general is a major area of practice in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology, and executive selection is extremely important in any organization, recent books on assessment and selection (Geisinger et al., 2013; Scott & Reynolds, 2010) provide little or no guidance on the selection of executive leaders. A notable exception is Howard and Thomas (2010), who compare factors distinguishing assessment of lower-, mid-, and executive-level managers and describe systems for designing and implementing assessment systems. There are many reasons for the dearth of research on executive selection (e.g., small samples, proprietary concerns, organization-specific requirements), which we will address in subsequent sections.

Much of our understanding of executive selection over the years has come from applied research, surveys of practice, and experience. For example, Hollenbeck (1994) summarized observations from his experience and eight books on the selection of chief executive officers (CEOs). Sessa and Taylor (2000) summarized results of a series of studies conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership in the 1990s using simulations and surveys of executives. More recently, Church and Rotolo (2013) reported on the practices of executive assessment for decision making among 84 companies that do assessment, development, and selection well. They found that the most frequent target of assessments (90%) in those major corporations studied were senior executives. Clearly, the practice of executive selection remains quite important to organizational success. The purpose of this chapter is to review research and practice in the selection of executive leaders and those who have high potential for these positions, and to comment on these developments over the past decades on the basis of our observations and results of surveys of organizational practices.

We begin the chapter by defining our focal group of executives and high-potentials. To clarify our focus, we make distinctions among leader behaviors, leaders, and management. Next, we describe a number of the attributes that are important for the effectiveness of top leaders and review techniques to assess these attributes in high-potentials and executive candidates. Then, we describe the importance of an integrated process of recruitment, development, and management of high-potentials and executives in the context of several factors. The process

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involves a multiyear, multistage program of assessing and developing leaders, the performance and potential of leaders, and the organization's talent management strategy including the outcomes expected, follower characteristics, diversity, and country culture. We include discussion of the increasingly significant role of the board of directors in C-suite decision making (Charan, Carey, & Useem, 2014) and the importance of transparency of processes and results. Finally, we discuss what may be the most difficult and challenging issue: an evaluation of whether leader selection methods work. We conclude with some review of past and present executive selection research discussing roles (actual and potential) of I-O psychologists in executive selection.

## **EXECUTIVES AND HIGH-POTENTIALS: WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY DO?**

Definitions of “executives” and “high-potentials” are highly variable and elusive. By “executives” we mean those at the top of the hierarchy in organizations, those who carry responsibility for major organizational units, or those who occupy key jobs that are essential to the purpose of the organization (e.g., chief scientist, marketing officer). In many large organizations these represent the top 200–300 key roles and are the focus of core talent management and succession planning efforts (Church & Waclawski, 2010). In publicly traded companies, executives are individuals in the top 10–15 C-suite roles running various business units; they are often Section 16 Executive Officers as defined by the Securities Exchange Act of 1934. Executives, defined by level in the organization and by participation in the company's executive compensation plan, generally make up less than 2% of the total employee population in large organizations. In smaller organizations, the half-dozen or so executives are a much smaller percentage of the employee population. Of these top-level leaders, few are women and minorities. For example, only 19 Fortune 500 companies are run by people of color and 21 run by women (Catalyst Organization, 2013; Diversity Inc., 2013).

In general, “executive” refers fairly exclusively to those at the top levels; by contrast, “high-potential” refers inclusively to one deemed to be capable, with the right development, of occupying a senior executive position at some time in the future. Thus, we include mid-level and lower-level managers who may have long-range potential in the pool of high-potentials.

High-potentials are typically high-performing managers who demonstrate the capabilities required for future success (Church & Silzer, 2014; Ready, Conger, & Hill, 2010). While having a track record of successful performance is important, it is only a leading indicator of potential, as the popularity of the nine-box model crossing three levels of performance and potential makes clear. At PepsiCo, a high-potential is defined as “A highly valuable contributor with a great deal of stretch capability within the organization. Such individuals are typically promoted to higher levels beyond their current role, and a select few can be seen as leading the organization at the senior levels” (p. 627, Church & Waclawski, 2010). In short, high-potentials are those thought to be able to reach senior executive jobs. Depending on the resources devoted by the organization to leadership development, high-potentials may be identified quite early in their careers.

The requirements of high potential for executive jobs are often organization-specific. Though clearly some aspects of leadership potential are universal, the term may be used more narrowly than general leadership potential. This is because the organization is answering the question “potential for what?” in its organization (i.e., a specific role), which is very different than focusing on the identification of raw potential for general pipeline development at lower levels (Church & Silzer, 2014). In this context then, classifying employees as high-potential grows out of an organization's efforts to (a) ensure continuity in its supply of executives through talent management and succession planning, (b) develop leaders within its culture, (c) respond to an increase in number of retirements, and (d) capitalize on the knowledge it has about internal staff members.

Executive jobs have changed dramatically since the 1950s when management was associated with large, stable organizations and consisted of the classic functions of planning, organizing, and controlling. Hemphill's classic studies of executive behavior arrived at 10 dimensions of management at the executive level (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970) that only faintly resemble the way executive work is described today. Now, those classic management

functions must be augmented with complex, diverse, and situation-specific leadership behaviors required by dynamic, global, competitive business environments. Bass (1990) captured the essence of the distinction between manager and leader: “Leaders manage and managers lead, but the two activities are not synonymous” (p. 383). To manage, the executive carries out the classic functions; to lead, the executive behaves in ways that inspires and influences the behavior of others. Members throughout the organization may carry out leadership behaviors, and a full description of a modern understanding of leadership behaviors is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Salancik, Calder, Rowland, Leblebici, & Conway, 1975 for the classic distinction between leadership vs. leader).

Today, the simplest answer to the question of “What do executives do?” may be “Whatever it takes.” Lengthy executive position descriptions have given way to outcome-oriented objectives, relating to what the executive is expected to contribute to the strategic mission of the organization. This is one of the reasons why the concept of critical experiences, first introduced in the late 1980s (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), has become so important in the development and selection of senior executives today. Many major corporations are now basing their talent management systems on the types of experiences, learnings, and outcomes that leaders achieve to determine their future succession paths (McCauley & McCall, 2014), and as a result career paths are far more dynamic and organic compared to career models of the 1970s through 1990s.

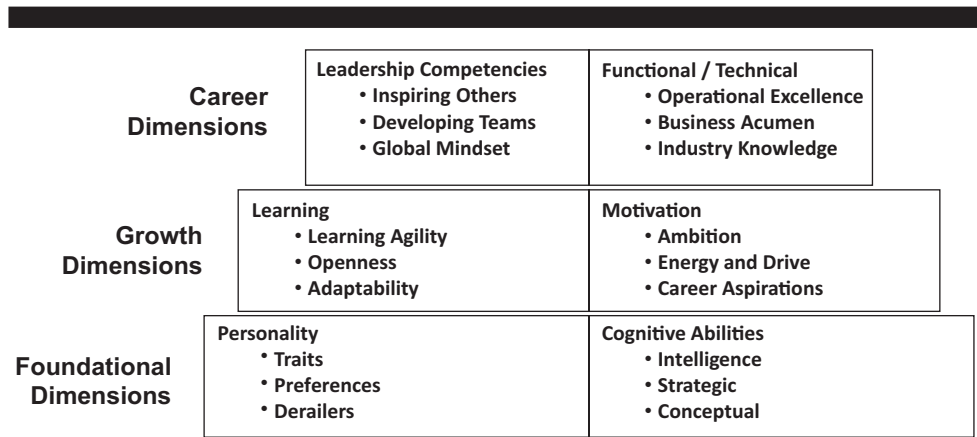
In addition, organizations, positions, and executives are seen as dynamic and rapidly changing. Executives are expected to change the jobs they are in and expected to be changed by these jobs. The higher the level of executive position, the more the incumbents shape the position to their preferences, talents, and abilities to advance the organization’s mission. The key question about selecting an executive has changed from simply “What must the executive do?” to the more complex “What must get done and what does it take to get that done?” The answer is typically a list of competencies or human attributes believed to underlie executive success. The answer to the question “Potential for what?” provides the finishing touches to the overall framework of potential for an executive selection process.

## EXECUTIVE COMPETENCIES, DIMENSIONS, AND ATTRIBUTES

Organizations seek to identify and articulate the key competencies, dimensions, and attributes needed for executive success in their given culture or context. These competencies, often expressed in terms of clusters of behaviors, are used in various assessments and feedback interventions (such as 360-degree feedback, structured interviews, and simulations) to both assess and develop readiness in high-potential talent. Not only do they specify what is needed in the organization, but they also communicate what is *perceived* to be important by senior leadership (often endorsed by the CEO). This is why many organization development (OD) practitioners advocate a custom approach to designing leadership frameworks for organizational change (Church, Waclawski, & Burke, 2001). Surprisingly, the vast majority of these competencies are consistent from one organization to the next (e.g., Church, 2014; Schippmann, 2010). What differs is the relative emphasis placed on each (e.g., inclusion, innovation, inspiring others).

While many practice-based applications exist today, very few theoretical approaches capture the full range of characteristics. One such model, the *Leadership Potential BluePrint*, introduced by Silzer and Church (2009), has gained significant traction in the field in the past few years (see Figure 38.1). Based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of the psychological literature and both internal and external talent management efforts, the *BluePrint* represents a comprehensive approach for framing the identification and prediction of future leadership success. It is currently used in assessment and development efforts at several large organizations, including Citibank, Eli Lilly, and PepsiCo (Church & Silzer, 2014).

A basic assumption of the *BluePrint* is that potential is a multidimensional construct consisting of a mixture of traits, specific capabilities, knowledge, and skills that contribute individually and collectively to long-term leadership success in organizations. Conceptually these attributes consist of three sets of dimensions: foundational, growth, and career. They are layered in the model from more stable traits to more developable skills and capabilities in leaders.



**FIGURE 38.1 The Leadership Potential *Blueprint***

Source: Adapted from Church & Silzer (2014) and Silzer & Church (2009).

Foundational Dimensions represent the most basic and enduring attributes of an individual. They are either largely genetically determined and/or shaped early in life. They include two core factors: personality (e.g., traits, preferences) and cognitive capabilities (e.g., intelligence, strategic thinking). They are generally quite stable throughout one's adult life and career. High-potentials and successful executives are seen as smarter, more strategic thinkers, with a constellation of personality factors related to strong interpersonal skills.

Growth Dimensions reflect an individual's ability and orientation toward development. They include learning (e.g., learning ability/agility, openness, adaptability) and individual motivation (e.g., ambition, drive, and career aspirations). Here, high-potentials are broad and fast learners with high ambition who seek out and apply learnings from prior developmental experiences.

Career Dimensions are perhaps the most widely targeted of the *Blueprint* areas in executive assessment and selection. The two core factors here are leadership (e.g., inspiring others, developing teams, global mindset) and functional and technical skills (e.g., operational excellence, business and industry knowledge). High-potentials and executives are seen as possessing the right mix of leadership capability to set the vision and strategy, while also having the breadth of knowledge to lead a complex global business environment.

Whether or not one believes that competencies are unique to a given organization, they represent a universal set of characteristics in the language of many managers. They may or may not even be the right areas to focus on for development (e.g., Hollenbeck, McCall, & Silzer, 2006; Schippmann, 2010). The key point here is that the *Blueprint* ensures that a relevant and all-encompassing set of capabilities have been identified and articulated for the purpose of answering the question: *Potential for what?*

Beyond that, the target of assessment becomes organizationally specific. Although academic reviews of the *Blueprint* have suggested that additional areas may need further highlighting, such as dark side personality constructs (e.g., Dalal & Nolan, 2009) or the importance of organizational culture and other contextual factors (e.g., Dominick & Gabriel, 2009; Heslin, 2009), the framework has resonated with many in the field and in practice. Aside from being embedded in various talent management efforts in large organizations (Church & Silzer, 2014), it has formed the underlying basis of recent consulting approaches (e.g., Aon-Hewitt, 2013), as well as scholar-practitioner models and reviews of potential in various publications (e.g., MacRae & Furnham, 2014; Piip & Harris, 2014). In addition, it was recently featured in a white paper on leadership development (Dugan & O'Shea, 2014) published jointly by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology (SIOP).

In short, the Leadership Potential *Blueprint* is a framework covering the landscape of factors contributing to high-potential and executive success and as such can be used to review an

entire talent management agenda (Church, 2014). The framework also highlights the need for a multitrait, multimethod approach to assessment and development in any high-potential process (Church & Rotolo, 2013). Recent research on 80 companies excelling in assessing, developing, and selecting executives supports these points, noting that dimensions in the *BluePrint* accounted for the vast majority of content (ranging from 50–75%) being assessed today in major corporations (Church, Rotolo, Ginther, & Levine, 2015). Thus, as a framework it captures the broad realm of attributes useful for high-potential assessment and development.

Along with determining the nature of potential broadly, organizations also face the challenge of deciding whether leadership differs at various levels. Since the early work of Katz (1955) and Mann (1965), there was the thought that the roles of leaders differ with leader level. Whereas at low levels technical skills are the most important, at middle levels interpersonal skills are the most important, and at higher levels conceptual skills are the most important. Indeed, research on derailment (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010), advancement (Freedman, 2005; Kates & Downey, 2005), and decision making (Brousseau, Driver, Hourihan, & Larsson, 2006) suggests that performance requirements change with level. In contrast, the Leadership Strataplex model suggests that high-level leaders do not lose the need for previous skill levels (technical, interpersonal), but that new skills are needed as leaders progress (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). Consistent with both schools of thought, Kaiser and Craig (2011) found that top-level leaders tended to be high on all leadership skills, but that the relationship between different skills and performance differed by level. For example, the job complexity of the executive role make learning agility and empowering leadership particularly important, whereas the interpersonal skill required for the middle-manager role make supportive leadership and a lack of abrasiveness most important.

In the next section, we discuss some of the research as it applies to key attributes associated with successful executives and high-potential leaders. The scores of human attributes that have been associated with effective leadership literally range from “a to z” (Bass, 1990). We will focus on those that are the most enduring, conceptually distinct, and currently used in practice today: cognitive abilities, personality attributes, and learning ability. Although functional and technical skills are important, these tend to be more domain- and organization- specific, and therefore are less generalizable for this discussion.

## Cognitive Abilities

Executives must have a fairly high level of intelligence to run complex organizations. The well-documented relationship of job complexity to cognitive abilities (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Dilchert, 2005) suggests that intelligence is important for executive success, but the type of intelligence and the relationship of intelligence to leader effectiveness have been debated for decades. Long ago, Korman (1968) concluded that verbal intelligence predicts performance of supervisors but not higher-level managers. Cavazotte, Moreno, and Hickmann (2012) found that intelligence had stronger indirect effects on managerial performance than all five of the Big Five personality variables. Menkes (2005) found that cognitive skills, such as analyzing and anticipating business trends, differentiate “star” executives from their peers. Crystallized intelligence (i.e., knowledge of facts) may be more important at lower levels, whereas fluid intelligence (akin to creativity) is important at executive levels. Although a certain (probably considerable) amount of cognitive abilities is important, additional levels may not be related to executive performance. In fact, some evidence suggests a curvilinear relationship: lower and higher levels of intelligence may be detrimental to leadership success (Bass, 1990). The search for elements of cognitive ability that are important to executive leadership has led to specification of different types of intelligence. For example, Dries and Pepermans (2012) suggest that cognitive ability is part of a greater construct that is central to assessing leadership, which they call analytical skills (e.g., intellectual curiosity, decision making, problem solving, strategic insight). Although at least a substantial amount of some form of cognitive ability is important for executive performance, the use of typical cognitive tests may be problematic, as described later in this chapter.

## Personality

The Five-Factor Model (“Big Five”) has become one of the most widely used and popular conceptualizations of personality (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1989). It includes conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, neuroticism (sometimes called anxiety), and extraversion. Variables in the model, especially extraversion and conscientiousness, have been associated with leadership effectiveness (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Personality traits may be particularly predictive of success for top-level leaders given the amount of autonomy that is characteristic of such positions (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Indeed, researchers at companies such as Sears (Bentz, 1990) have demonstrated the importance of personality to top-level leaders in organizations. For example, Colbert, Barrick, and Bradley (2014) found that CEO conscientiousness and top-management team conscientiousness were related to organizational performance.

For the flip side, Hogan and Hogan (2001) suggested that “dark side” personality traits (e.g., paranoia and passive-aggressiveness) can also be used to predict leadership failure. In fact, many executive coaches and organizational assessment programs have embraced the “derailer” concept to the point that they find these traits more useful than positive personality dimensions for development purposes. This is in fact the premise of the book *Why CEOs Fail* (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003), which with the Hogan suite has launched a trend in the industry. The popularity of the derailer approach may be a function of several factors (e.g., the dark-side characteristics may manifest themselves in stress, and they can be easily identified). In addition, their negative effects may be mitigated more easily than core personality traits by behavioral interventions and adaptations in the work environment. For example, it is far easier to coach an executive to be less excitable during times of stress than it is to help him or her to be less anxious in general. Curiously, there is also evidence that extremely low levels of the dark-side leader personality variables are also associated with ineffective leadership (Kaiser, LeBreton, & Hogan, 2015).

## Learning Ability

The ability to learn and then adapt one’s leadership is a complex and controversial competency. The job complexity and changing nature of the executive role makes learning ability particularly important (Kaiser & Craig, 2011). There is no agreed-upon definition of learning ability, and there is controversy around the related construct of learning agility. They may not be distinguishable from cognitive ability or they may be all that is needed for executive potential. Learning ability seems to encompass aspects of motivation, positive orientation toward learning, and flexibility in thinking. For example, Maurer and Lippstreu (2008) highlight the importance of motivation to develop leadership, specifically, as a driver of leader engagement in learning. Reichard and Johnson (2011) said it includes learning goal orientation as it interacts with organizational norms to create motivation to learn. The *BluePrint* highlights two aspects of growth orientation: learning ability (e.g., what some call learning agility, openness, adaptability, feedback-seeking behavior), and individual motivation (e.g., ambition, drive, career aspirations, and achievement focus). High-potentials are generally characterized as high learners who are open to feedback and individual development and driven to succeed and advance. Many organizations seek to assess learning ability through a review of relevant background experiences in the screening process.

## ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

Methods to assess these and other attributes range from using internal performance appraisal data to elaborate testing and assessment. In the following section, we summarize research on several different types of assessment techniques and, where data exist, discuss their use and validity in executive selection. The strength of the relationship between a specific attribute measured by a given assessment technique and a specific criterion of leadership effectiveness is typically only moderate. That is, the correlation is seldom over .35 to .40. Combinations of

multiple measures of multiple attributes often yield correlations in the range of .50 to .60. In other words, approximately 15–35% (i.e.,  $.35^2$  to  $.60^2$ ) of the variation in leadership effectiveness is predicted from one or more human attributes. Readers seeking more information on specific tests, questionnaires, and assessment methods in I-O psychology will find the handbook by Thomas (2004) quite useful.

## Cognitive Ability Tests

Although there is little question that executives must have relatively high cognitive ability, there is mixed evidence regarding whether cognitive ability tests are widely used, valid, or useful for selection into top ranks of the organization. In a survey of 628 staffing directors, Howard, Erker, and Bruce (2007) found that approximately 50% of organizations surveyed used ability tests at high managerial levels. In another survey, Silzer and Church (2010) found that 20% of companies surveyed used cognitive ability to identify high-potentials. More recently, Church and Rotolo (2013) found that 39% and 38% of companies used cognitive ability tests to assess high-potential and senior executives. Cognitive ability tests are commonly used in individual psychological assessment (as described later in this chapter).

Although cognitive ability tests (in comparison with other measures) have been shown to have some of the highest validity correlations with performance throughout the managerial ranks, some organizations may be reluctant to use cognitive abilities tests for executive selection for a variety of reasons. Fiedler (1995) pointed out that measures of an individual's cognitive abilities have been marginally successful in predicting how a leader will perform in a particular job. Furthermore, cognitive ability tests have a potential for adverse impact (Ones, Dilchert, & Viswesvaran, 2012). At the highest executive levels, marked restriction of range in test scores may provide little meaningful differentiation among candidates and may severely restrict correlation coefficients. Finally, from a practical standpoint, it is difficult to use cognitive test results for developmental purposes at very senior levels. Thus, they can be perceived negatively as a part of an assessment battery, unless the real intent is to use the results for decision making.

## Personality Questionnaires

Tett, Jackson, and Rothstein (1991) reported that personality tests, and in particular measures of the Five-Factor Model of personality, were frequently used in selection contexts. More recently, research has demonstrated that personality tests that are more specific than the Big Five are more predictive than the Big Five (Pulakos, Borman, & Hough, 2008). Thus, the use of personality assessments seems to be on the rise. In Howard et al.'s (2007) survey of organizations, 65% of the organizations had never used a personality inventory for selection. However, Silzer and Church (2010) found that 55% of companies used personality as an indicator of high potential, and then in Church and Rotolo's (2013) survey of organizations, 66% of companies reported using personality to assess high-potentials, and 57% used such methods to assess executives.

Considerable controversy exists over the extent to which responses to self-report personality tests are influenced by contaminants such as self-enhancement biases and faking. Contrasting opinions on these matters are expressed in a series of articles in the Autumn and Winter 2007 issues of *Personnel Psychology*. Morgeson et al. (2007) raised questions over the utility of self-report personality questionnaires for selection purposes, but other authors argued for the utility of personality measures in selection, particularly when more sophisticated weighting schemes and conceptualizations of personality are used (Tett & Christiansen, 2007).

Although 85% of Howard et al.'s (2007) respondents had never used integrity tests for executive selection, there is some evidence that they could be useful at the executive level (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993). Ones et al.'s (1993) meta-analysis demonstrated that integrity tests were equally good at predicting performance in jobs ranging from low to medium to high complexity, and integrity tests were better at predicting counterproductive work behaviors for



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highly complex jobs. In practice, at more senior levels, personality tests tend to be used in conjunction with other tools and focused on both development and decision making. Church and Rotolo (2013), for example, reported that companies in their survey were using on average about four different assessment tools at the same time, including personality measures, in their assessment and development efforts with executives.

## **Biodata Questionnaires**

There is little question that one's experiences during childhood, adolescence, education, military training, and initial work up to the time of being considered to have high potential or being chosen for an executive position are relevant to later success. Considerable research has shown that systematic measures of early life experiences can be highly predictive of performance in various jobs (Schmitt & Golubovich, 2013), including supervisors and managers (Stokes & Cooper, 1995). However, at the executive level, systematically gathering information about individuals' early life experiences can be problematic because the relevance may not be apparent. Formally scored biodata questionnaires are not used frequently, although their prevalence as a selection device may be increasing. In a 2006 survey of staffing directors, 60% reported that they used application forms and 23% (up from 13% in 2004) used a biographical data form (Howard et al., 2007). More recently, Church and Rotolo (2013) reported that biodata questionnaires were the fourth most commonly used tool in assessment and development efforts at 84 top development companies both for high-potentials (43%) and senior executives (43%). At the more senior levels, general biodata may have been replaced by critical experiences (i.e., some pre-set list of experiences seen as necessary for success). Many organizations are focusing on key work experiences that have developed management talent during the previous 10 years and can guide planning for the next 10–15 years to develop that talent further for C-suite roles (McCauley & McCall, 2014). Biodata may also be gathered in interviews.

## **Multisource Feedback**

Multisource or 360-degree performance feedback questionnaires are often used for selection and development of high-potentials and for screening of executive candidates. Managers are rated on a questionnaire by their supervisors, subordinates, peers, and selves, and even internal customers, external customers, vendors, or suppliers (Bracken, Timmreck, & Church, 2001). The content of questions may provide assessment of a variety of decision-making, interpersonal, and leadership capabilities. Estimates of the use of 360-degree appraisals range from 12–29% of all organizations (Church, 2000), to 60% when used to assess executives (Church & Rotolo, 2013), to 66% of companies using them to assess high potential (Church & Rotolo, 2013), and up to 90% of Fortune 500 companies (Atwater & Waldman, 1998). Although 360-degree appraisals have primarily been used as a feedback and development tool for managers (Goodstone & Diamante, 1998), Tornow (1993) suggested that the method can also be used for appraisal, selection, and promotion. Indeed, Halverson, Tonidandel, Barlow, and Dipboye (2005) found that ratings and self–other agreement on 360-degree ratings predicted promotion rate throughout one's career in the United States Air Force.

Despite the trend toward using 360-degree appraisals for administrative purposes (Bracken & Church, 2013), there is controversy over their application to selection (Toegel & Conger, 2003). Specifically, writers have expressed several concerns: (a) self-enhancement by the manager who has a strong motivation to convey that he or she has been performing well (Craig & Hannum, 2006); (b) raters who know the assessment is for administrative purposes may not wish to negatively impact the focal manager (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000); and (c) employment decisions based on ratings from unknown and minimally trained raters may not be legally defensible. In fact, Morgeson, Mumford, and Campion (2005) noted that one of the leading organizational consultants in the use of 360-degree appraisals, the Center for Creative Leadership, restricts their use to

developmental purposes. However, the authors of the *Handbook of Multisource Feedback* (Bracken et al., 2001) and practitioners in the 360 area (Bracken & Church, 2013) recently made a formal declaration of the importance of using 360 for decision making, citing a number of factors that have changed since the original concerns of the 1990s. In support of this position, Church and Rotolo (2013) cite the recent increased use of 360-degree appraisals to assess high-potentials and executives, and Murphy, Cleveland, and Mohler (2001) summarize evidence of their reliability, validity, and meaningfulness.

### Assessment Centers

The assessment center (AC) method has been used for evaluating executive potential for more than 50 years (Thornton, Rupp, & Hoffman, 2015). Originally validated with longitudinal studies as an indicator of early management potential of men and women (Howard & Bray, 1988), the method has been used to assess executives in numerous industries and countries. The unique aspect of the AC method is the combination of features that involve observation of overt behavior in multiple simulations of organizational challenges by multiple trained observers who integrate evaluations in consensus discussion, statistical formulae, or a combination of both. Some ACs involve the consideration of information from other techniques, such as cognitive ability tests, personality questionnaires, multisource feedback, or a background interview. Older and recent surveys show that large numbers of organizations use ACs for selecting executives and high-potentials (Thornton & Krause, 2009). Executive ACs involve dimensions such as global awareness and strategic vision, calling for strategic decisions such as launching joint ventures, managing the talent pool, or promoting a turnaround. Studies have found that ACs predict senior management potential (Ritchie, 1994) and that an AC added incremental validity over cognitive ability tests in predicting executive success in a public organization in Germany (Krause, Kersting, Heggstad, & Thornton, 2006).

### Leadership Questionnaires

The reader may be surprised that we have not reviewed leadership behavior and style questionnaires (Clark & Clark, 1990). To be sure, scores of self-report questionnaires have been developed over the years, such as the Leader Behavioral Description Questionnaire and the Leadership Opinion Questionnaire. The respondent is typically asked to indicate how often he or she does certain behaviors, such as directing the work of subordinates or providing them support. Although these instruments have been useful in research, in helping individuals gain insight into their leadership styles, and in counseling and training settings, they have not been applied extensively in executive selection. The older questionnaires typically do not cover the broader set of leader characteristics deemed important in recent leadership studies, and they all suffer the potential biasing effects of self-enhancement.

### Individual Psychological Assessment

The individual psychological assessment (IPA) procedure typically involves a single person administering some variable combination of in-depth background interview, tests of cognitive abilities and personality, and behavioral observations and ratings (Church & Rotolo, 2013). An individual assessor makes judgments about how to combine and interpret assessment information to make judgments about the fit between the candidate and the job, executive team, and organization.

Because of the idiosyncratic nature of IPAs, their effectiveness has been and remains a subject of disagreement. The job analysis is sometimes as informal as a discussion with the client organization about what the job incumbent must accomplish and what competencies are required. In organizations with more sophisticated talent management and assessment programs, significant

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job profiling may be conducted before the assessment to ensure rigor and validity, especially when the results are used for decision making. Inconsistency in how information is gathered, integrated, and reported is also of concern. Highhouse (2002) concluded: “The holistic approach to judgment and prediction has simply not held up to scientific scrutiny” (p. 391). He speculated that IPA, like psychotherapy before it, has achieved “functional autonomy [that] has enabled individual psychological assessment to survive and flourish” (p. 391).

On the other hand, the IPA allegedly has several advantages. It has been a well-known part of the toolkit of psychologist-practitioners in most consulting firms for decades (Ryan & Sackett, 1987). Its popularity over the years is due, in part, to its flexibility. It can be used to assess individual executives on the spur of the moment, and it can serve various purposes (Jeanneret & Silzer, 1998). Use of multiple methods is consistent with the assumption of the *BluePrint* that multiple measures of the same constructs are more useful for key talent management decision making, diagnostic discussions, and interventions than any single measure. An IPA can measure a variety of dimensions, including personality characteristics, cognitive ability, learning ability, and motivation. A recent large-scale meta-analysis (Morris, Daisley, Wheeler, & Boyer, 2015) demonstrated the IPA has moderate criterion validity in relation to subjective criteria such as managerial ratings (mean  $r = .24$ ) and administrative decisions (mean  $r = .19$ ). Validity was higher when the IPA involved cognitive ability tests (but not personality tests, biodata, or interviews), when the same assessor was used for all candidates, and when the method was applied to managers versus non-managers.

IPAs are used by many large organizations. Piotrowski (2007) provided an informative description of an IPA program run at The Hartford using a cadre of outside psychologists in which more than 300 managers are assessed per year. Historically it has been more frequently used with high-potentials after they have been identified as high-potential rather than as part of the high-potential selection decision. PepsiCo, however, has embraced the use of individual assessment and development at four different levels for different purposes with their multitier Leadership Assessment and Development program (LeAD). Based on the *Leadership Potential BluePrint*, it provides an intensive integrated assessment and development experience linked to key leadership transitions and targeted at individuals in career stages in the organization (Church & Silzer, 2014). At the lowest levels in the organization, the emphasis of the program is on the identification of future leadership potential emphasizing more of the Foundational and Growth dimensions. At the next two levels, the focus is on confirmation and verification of high-potential status along with accelerated development of those already identified for future roles through the talent review process. The content focus here is balanced across all elements of the *BluePrint*. At the highest levels, the assessment program is more about shaping and refining executives for succession planning purposes focusing on leadership capabilities and functional breadth rather than selection decisions per se.

Interestingly, all four layers of assessment at PepsiCo use a combination suite of tools, but some of the specific tools vary based on the emphasis and requirements of intervention goals (development versus decision making), the nature of the target audience (junior versus mid-level versus C-suite talent), and the cost, complexity, and timing of administering to small versus large numbers of employees globally in multiple languages. Thus, the total LeAD system uses a number of measures, including personality tools, custom online simulations, in-person assessment centers, structured interviews, biodata, 360-degree measures, and situational judgment tests. While the configuration of tools many differ somewhat by level (e.g., the OPQ is available in more languages globally than other personality measures but is less appropriate for senior executives), there is a concerted effort to ensure total coverage across the *BluePrint* dimensions and consistency in measurement wherever possible. Other measures, such as 360-degree feedback, are used more consistently. The final result is a comprehensive multitrait, multimethod system based on a consistent framework that has been validated across the different levels of the *BluePrint*.

## EXECUTIVE SELECTION IN ORGANIZATIONAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Although this chapter focuses on executive selection, the final screening procedure is only one phase of a long-term, complex, multistage process of identifying leaders. In this section we describe several stages of the selection of organizational leaders, including who makes

the selection, the processes involved, and the criteria and standards for evaluating candidates. Organizations begin the process of selecting future leaders during college recruiting and screening management trainees. Recruiters, HR staff, and line managers evaluate the credentials of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral graduates, often favoring candidates with high grades and special extracurricular accomplishments from top-flight universities.

Performance evaluations along the way are critical. For years it has been noted that, despite their well-known limitations, supervisory judgments were the most commonly used practice for predicting managerial effectiveness (Thornton & Byham, 1982). The same has been said more recently with regard to executive selection (Sessa, 2001) and for perhaps the same reasons: Performance reviews by supervisors are practical and widely accepted by those in the organization. In many organizations, more formal and complex systems of performance management have replaced simple performance appraisal programs, and common practice today includes review and participation by higher-level management and HR specialists. Nevertheless, a high-performance evaluation by an employee's immediate supervisor has become "the admission price for future growth and development" (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001, p. 166).

The nine-box grid with three levels of performance crossed with three levels of potential is an integral part of many talent management processes today. Placement on the grid typically begins with the immediate manager's evaluation, reviewed by the next-level manager. Other inputs to the potential ratings are often based on a combination of evaluations by each individual's manager on performance in initial assignments, success in management training programs, and formal assessments of leadership potential using a variety of assessment methods described in previous sections of this chapter. Grid ratings, usually done annually, become a part of the discussion at talent management meetings and developmental assignments.

For such grid ratings to be effective, they must differentiate among individuals on both performance and potential, and the two ratings must not be highly correlated. The process has failed in organizations when all individuals fall along the diagonal. There should also be concern that ratings of potential might be related to age and thus be unfairly biased against older managers.

A critical set of experiences takes place as individuals are recommended for and placed in a number of career-enhancing positions after a manager is identified as high potential at successively higher managerial levels. Many persons are instrumental in such movement, including any assessor who recommends a developmental assignment, HR staff who know of relevant opportunities and openings, the candidate's immediate manager who endorses and fosters such assignment, mentors who are "looking out for" the individual, and higher-level managers in new organizational settings who are receptive to taking on new staff members.

As managers advance within an organization, their reviewers become a broader group, typically including more senior executives, the CEO, and the board. The board of directors of an organization has become increasingly involved in an organization's selection (as well as compensation and evaluation) of the CEO as a result of the recent raft of corporate scandals and "a subsequent stream of regulations and guidelines" (Nadler, Behan, & Nadler, 2006, p. 174). Boards are involved in reviewing the performance of not only the CEO and senior executives but also current high-potentials and staff who are in the pipeline to become executives in the next several years.

At a critical point, individuals are selected into the top levels of executive positions. Here consultants often provide individual psychological assessment of finalists to the CEO and the board of directors. Candidates are evaluated on a combination of high performance in a variety of critical assignments, potential to lead the organization toward long-range strategic goals, and fit with organizational requirements and the existing executive leadership team.

In addition, because some organizations have board-mandated specific requirements for CEO candidacy (e.g., based on retirement planning scenarios), the current level and career stage of potential successors may also factor in an accelerated development strategy. Research by SpencerStuart (2008), an executive search firm, noted that the average age of Fortune 500 CEOs has decreased from 59 in the 1980s to 54 at the time of the survey, and the median tenure was five years. This trend puts pressure on organizations to ensure that individuals in their pipeline are developed with the right experiences and at the right speed. Here again, organizations should be concerned that the process is not biased against older managers.

Examples of the integration of evaluations of performance and potential are General Electric's widely copied process called Session C (Freedman, 2004) and PepsiCo's talent review model (Church & Waclawski, 2010). Both include formal annual review of past accomplishments and potential, input from multiple sources at the top executive levels, and suggestions for future developmental assignments.

### **Fit**

Most cases of executive failure are accompanied by a statement that "there wasn't a good fit." What does this mean? The traditional selection paradigm matches individuals with jobs. At executive levels, a broader array of characteristics of individuals and jobs are essential; fit becomes multidimensional on both sides. Hollenbeck (1994) argued that successful selection depends upon the fit among three sets of variables: those of the individual, the organization, and the external environment or strategic demands. Moses and Eggebeen (1999) suggested that fit changes over time (e.g., from a large, stable organization to a faster-paced, versatile, constantly evolving organization such as the earlier to the later AT&T or IBM). Sessa and Taylor (2000) discussed characteristics of the candidate, the organization, and its talent management strategy, but only recently has there been exploration of what talent management strategy means and its implications.

### **Talent Management (TM) Strategies**

The processes of selecting high-potentials and executives are often claimed to be a reflection of the TM strategy of the organization, but for this assertion to be meaningful, the term TM requires specification. As used in human resource management (HRM) literature, TM means many different things, and there is no single universal operational form. Acknowledging the somewhat oversimplified distinction of types of TM, Thornton et al. (2015) identified three general talent management strategies among the myriad descriptions in recent HR literature. Personnel and human resource management (P/HRM) is the traditional emphasis on highly standardized procedures of evaluating persons for promotion based on merit, fitness, and freedom from patronage adhered to in many public organizations. Strategic human resource management (SHRM) is probably the most frequently endorsed form of TM carried out in organizations in recent years; it emphasizes the integration of numerous HR functions, including assessment, development, and selection of the organization's inclusive total talent pool. Targeted talent management (TTM) places major emphasis on just the most select and highly skilled staff members in highly critical positions.

Selection of high-potential and executive leaders differs when organizations adhere to these three strategies. P/HRM places emphasis on fairness and transparency, SHRM attempts to be quite inclusive in fostering talent throughout the organization, and TTM recognizes the need to attend primarily to just the exclusive top talent in mission-critical positions. Any given organization may follow any combination of these strategies at different times, in different parts of the organizations, and with different occupations and job positions.

### **Followers**

Follower characteristics may also impact what type of leader will be effective in a given situation. Many factors have been shown to moderate the effectiveness of leaders' behavior, including followers' satisfaction and perceptions of their abilities (Hersey & Blanchard, 1984), need for autonomy, openness to experience (Groves, 2005), motives (Wofford, Whittington, & Goodwin, 2001), and achievement orientation, self-esteem, and need for structure (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). In particular, Hooijberg and Schneider (2001) suggested that executive leaders who are

high in social intelligence may be better able to adapt to differences in followers' attitudes, personalities, and motives.

### **Diversity**

An increasingly important consideration for the selection of high-potentials is diversity in leadership ranks. In general, climates that promote diversity and inclusion have positive effects on organizational outcomes such as performance, innovation, firm reputation, recruitment, and organizational attitudes (Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Walker, Field, Bernerth, & Becton, 2012). Companies with outstanding records for diversity and inclusion have seen the benefits of diversity and inclusion efforts through organizational development techniques such as employee surveys, performance management, and training (Church, Rotolo, Shull, & Tuller, 2013). The benefits of diversity are most pronounced when women represent more than 22% and racial minorities represent 25% of the executive team (Labaye, 2012; Roberson & Park, 2007), numbers that most companies fall short of. Church et al. (2013) suggest that diversity should be included in the selection of high-potentials in two ways: (1) leaders who are effective at diversity relationships and inclusion should be more likely to be promoted, and (2) individuals who fulfill diversity objectives should be given added consideration in the selection process. They cite benchmarking studies from the Mayflower Group and The Conference Board showing that 59–82% of the companies consider diversity in their TM system. In another survey, Silzer and Church (2010) found that 25% of companies set goals for the representation of women and minorities in their high-potential pool. Other companies monitor the percentage of these groups but do not set formal goals.

The dearth of women and minorities at the top of organizations suggests that more work is needed in this area to ensure that women and minorities are making it into the pipeline and transitioning into top leader roles. Maybe I-O psychologists could help fashion some variation of the Rooney Rule (Freedman, 2014) to encourage organizations to assess at least one woman for all phases of the executive succession process and still meet affirmative action standards.

### **Country Culture**

The country culture in which a leader's organization is embedded can also impact leadership effectiveness. That is to say, certain leadership traits and behaviors will be perceived more positively in some cultures than others. Considerable evidence for cross-cultural differences in leadership effectiveness has come from the work on the GLOBE project (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007). As examples, charismatic leadership is highly preferred in South Africa, whereas consensus-based leadership is preferred in Ireland. Moreover, the type of selection practices used to hire executives should reflect the national culture from which an organization is hiring, such as the prominent use of individual difference testing in the individualistic U.S. culture and their lack of use in more collectivistic cultures (Dipboye & Johnson, 2008).

### **Summary**

The evidence for the validity, relevance, and accessibility of these techniques for the selection of executives and high-potentials is mixed. Moreover, perhaps the most widely used process for selecting executives from outside the organization involves and is managed by external executive recruiters (Howard et al., 2007), a process not discussed in detail here. Executive recruiters typically use interviews and references as the data-gathering methods, and then provide descriptions of candidates and make their own recommendations to the organization (Wackerle, 2001). When there are internal and external candidates for an executive position in an organization, there may well be much more information available about the internal employee (e.g., performance

appraisals, test results). The differences raise questions of the comparability and fairness of the selection decisions. Equity may be introduced if an external source assesses both internal and external candidates, a process that is being carried out more frequently (Howard, 2001).

There does not appear to be any one best method for executive selection, and evidence of the prevalence of one selection technique or the lack of use of another does not support the measure's validity or utility. Each of the measures discussed here may be useful for selecting executives. Organizations must examine the qualities they are looking for, their staffing strategy and philosophy, and their past success with different measures when choosing their selection plan. In addition, consideration must be given to a leader's fit with the organization.

## DOES IT WORK?

In the previous sections, we reviewed several techniques and processes used in executive selection. Mixed amounts and levels of relevant published, supportive evidence were noted for each assessment method. This begs the question: Does the overall process of executive selection work? This question is particularly important given the marked increase in executive turnover since the 1990s, with many high-profile cases of executive failure (Walberg, 2014). The high levels of top-level turnover have only increased the "war for talent," creating greater reliance on outside selection rather than internal promotion (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012). Russell (2001) reported a longitudinal study of performance among 98 top-level executives. Information from interviews and questionnaires was integrated into ratings on several performance dimensions by teams of executives and researchers via a process akin to the wrap-up discussion in an AC. Competency ratings in problem solving and people orientation predicted subsequent fiscal and nonfiscal performance trends.

Why is there so little empirical research on the effectiveness of executive selection practices? Such research is difficult for several reasons. First, as Hollenbeck (1994) pointed out, there are several inherent difficulties of CEO selection: each CEO position is unique and may be changing in an uncertain future; the selection decision is unique; the decision makers may never have made such a decision and are probably not trained to do so; the process is probably not completely open; and outside forces may come into play.

Second, it is difficult to conduct a good study to determine if the process was successful. Hollenbeck (1994, 2009) offered a partial list of explanations: the long time involved to select one person, high secrecy surrounding this high-stakes choice, and difficulty for credible researchers to get access to the expensive process. There are also technical research problems precluding classic criterion validation studies: small sample size, low range in measures of key variables such as intelligences, resistance of candidates to be subject to onerous and sensitive assessment procedures, inherent limitations (e.g., faking, biased rating by self and others) of some promising constructs, difficulty of accessing a comparison group of individuals who are not selected, and complexity of any criterion measure. The difficulty of finding a meaningful criterion of effectiveness of selecting high-potentials and executive leaders bedevils researchers and practitioners. Appealing as it may appear, an index of organizational performance as a complex criterion measure has proven to be a contentious topic in the leadership literature. The lack of published empirical studies of the accuracy of executive selection procedures may be lamentable, but it is hardly surprising.

Furthermore, there has been a debate over the extent to which leadership impacts organizational performance. For example, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) have argued that leadership has a minimal impact on organizational performance. Despite these arguments, other researchers have demonstrated the enormous potential for leaders to affect organizational performance. Estimates of the variance in profitability due to the CEO range from 16–20% (Hambrick & Quigley, 2014) to 43.9% (Weiner & Mahoney, 1981).

However, the relationship between leadership and organizational performance may not be a good barometer of the success of leader selection practices. The executive selection practice may be effective, but organizational performance may falter because success also depends to a large extent on the CEO's team. In addition, if all leader selection efforts were successful, there would be no variance in resultant competencies, and thus there would be no statistical

relationship with organizational performance. There is a definite need for research on the use of different selection methods in relation with various indices of organizational and leadership performance to further address this issue. Howard and Thomas (2010) offered suggestions for a variety of metrics to study the effectiveness of executive assessment programs (e.g., evaluation of the focus, process, outcomes, and impact of the methods).

### Research Opportunities

Future involvement of I-O psychologists could include further articulation of the competencies and attributes needed for diverse organizational challenges (e.g., defining and assessing characteristics related to long term success such as character); specification of organizational and environmental variables that need to be considered in determining fit; understanding how the complex process of executive selection will be done differently in every job and every organization; and training CEOs, top executive teams, and boards of directors in processes of matching candidates to demands of positions. Consulting firms are becoming more involved in assessing internal and external candidates for CEO positions, and these assignments may provide opportunities for I-O psychologists to apply more scientific methods to the selection of CEOs.

On the basis of our observations of the field of executive selection, we note that there was much systematic research in the 1960s to 1980s on early identification of management potential and executive selection, but not as much recent published research, possibly due to the changing standards of publications in scholarly journals. Previously, various assessment techniques (e.g., biodata, ACs, and cognitive ability tests) were evaluated for selection, but emphasis in the past two decades has been placed on development. Considering the noted scandals in executive ranks, selection may be gaining renewed importance as the cost of executive failure becomes higher. The concern for fit is probably the most significant development in executive selection in the last 20 years. More research is needed into the judgmental processes that are needed to combine complex patterns of information about candidates on the one hand with the complex changing patterns of organizational and situational demands on the other hand. At the risk of appearing nihilistic, we suggest that the traditional statistical methods used by I-O psychologists to study relationships of predictor scores and criterion measures may not be up to the task of understanding the processes of executive selection at the highest levels of organizations. Studies of these complex processes of executive selection may call for different research methods to study executive selection, including clinical methods of judgment, policy capturing with executive recruiters' judgments, evaluation of broader measures of organization-level human capital (Birri & Melcher, 2011), systematic qualitative studies of successes and failures, and a return to dormant complex validation strategies such as synthetic validation (McPhail, 2007).

### CONCLUSIONS

There are many ways executives get the job done. There is no agreed-upon list of executive competencies or attributes, and only recently have more systematic hierarchies of these dimensions emerged. Many competencies that are commonly listed are too broad or vague to guide assessment efforts (e.g., strategic global perspective, thinking outside the box, performance orientation, and emphasis on people development). To get the job done, the executive will have a pattern of human attributes needed by the organization at the point in time of selection. No single attribute or simple profile of attributes is related to executive effectiveness. These attributes form a unique profile including some forms of intelligence, personality characteristics, and values, as well as experience, knowledge, and effective interpersonal skills. Organizations use various methods to assess these attributes. The quality of tests, personality questionnaires, and interviews has improved over the years, but these procedures are used in different ways at each stage of the process. They are used in more formal systematic, quantitative ways at screening candidates into pools of high-potentials, but in more informal and variable ways during the



integration of information at time of selection into executive ranks. The most common method of selecting executives remains the performance/potential review process by higher-level executives and the board of directors. In larger companies, the process patterned after GE's Session C has become common.

The rigor of these final steps of leader selection varies considerably. Observers of these processes have lamented the lack of consistency and sophistication shown by many organizations. Suggestions have been made for more systematic processes of determining organization needs, assessing competencies in candidates, and matching competencies to needs. In fact, many organizations are following these practices, but little research has been conducted to evaluate these methods. I-O psychologists have helped articulate and evaluate the attributes related to leader effectiveness and have been involved in designing programs to screen candidates into high-profile pools and to develop leadership and managerial skills. In addition, I-O psychologists have specialized in individual assessment of external candidates. However, with few exceptions of psychologists who consult with CEOs and boards, they have not played extensive roles in the final stages of executive selection among internal candidates.

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