



# Picking winners

**David Williams** points out that life is far from fair. This is particularly true when it comes to that all important step of making first career moves after university

Life isn't fair. The phrase is a truism, it might even be true, but it doesn't tell the whole story. We all understand that there are some things that have to be made as fair as possible – examinations and lotteries for example – and that any deliberate attempt to manipulate the result of these things is unfair in a way that is highly unethical, even criminal. But there are also other systems that are impossible to make fair, however hard you try: an audition for instance, where a subjective assessment of your acting ability might come second place to whether your face fits the role; or the choice of which of dozens of talented young footballers deserves an apprenticeship with a major club. So where does graduate recruitment

sit on the spectrum of fairness? Is it more like an examination or an audition?

## **Don't be fooled by school**

It is very easy when you come out of university to think that graduate recruitment is like an examination, because it looks so familiar. Just like a real examination, graduate recruitment includes tests, it includes being assessed against a series of known criteria (the skills or competencies you need to do the job), and in graduate recruitment the interview certainly feels more like a viva than it does an appearance on The X Factor. On top of this, employers talk about the process in a way that certainly makes you think it is a thorough, objective examination of your potential. But just because it looks, feels and sounds like an exam doesn't mean that it is.

### No pass mark

The first problem with treating graduate recruitment like an examination is the lack of a pass mark. If an employer has ten vacancies, the interviewers are only going to pick ten people, regardless of how well the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth candidate does. Even if the difference between the tenth and the eleventh candidate is impossible for anyone outside the system to perceive, they are still only going to offer ten people a job. This makes graduate recruitment very different to an examination in which, if you reach the right standard, you will get the grade, regardless of what the other candidates are achieving. And it makes it much more like an audition in which only one person can take the starring role, regardless of how good the others are.

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### No set standard

The second big problem with treating graduate recruitment as an exam is finding an external objective standard against which everyone can be measured.

Perhaps the biggest headache employers have today is the sheer number of graduates there are out there, all of whom look more or less the same from their point of view. This may seem a strange thing to say given the range of human nature you see around you, but all the hard information an employer really has to go on is A levels, degree class, subject choice and where you went to university. And none of these make an ideal basis for picking out the winners from the also-rans.

Grade inflation has made A levels less and less useful; everyone these days knows they have to get a 2.1; subject choice is mostly only helpful for technical jobs; and modern employers try so hard to avoid snobbery and prejudice that they refuse to pick people simply on the basis of where they went to university.

This, by the way, is why spelling, grammar, and really paying attention to answering the questions is so important when it comes to application forms. With no other hard facts to go on, it is the people who don't make an effort with these communication and presentational skills that get rejected out of hand.

### Interviews and assessment centres

The problem of whom to pick and on what basis doesn't go away however when it comes to seeing candidates in the flesh at interviews and assessment centres. In fact, it gets even worse. Because, once you are invited to an interview or an assessment centre, you can be pretty certain that you have exactly the same paper potential (the right grades and subject choices and written communication skills) as the other candidates, or why else would you be there? The real choice now comes down to what employers think about your soft skills, things like leadership potential, ability to work in a team, communication skills et cetera. This is where the problems with finding an objective, external, exam-like measuring system really begin.

*“One man's evidence of leadership potential is another woman's evidence of the kind of insufferable arrogance that would tear a team apart.”*

### How can you measure character?

The problems with measuring soft skills are many. First, every employer likes to define these skills for themselves and so none of them can agree on exactly what they are. So there is no external standard there. Secondly, no two interviewers within the same firm will agree on what behaviour actually constitutes evidence for a particular skill or competency. Thirdly, no two interviewers will necessarily agree on how that evidence should be scored. Put simply, one man's evidence of leadership potential is another woman's evidence of the kind of insufferable arrogance that would tear a team apart.

This doesn't stop employers trying to mark candidates against a whole range of attributes, in fact they have to do so in order to justify their choices to themselves, but just

putting a number in the box doesn't make the system objective.

### Exam or audition?

All of this means that assessment centres are nothing like exams. In an exam, barring the occasional brainstorm, you ought to always get the same result, the one that your preparation and abilities deserve. If you go back two days later and sit the same type of paper, your grade should not vary.

Assessment centres and interviews aren't like this. If you have a different interviewer, if the other candidates change, if you give a subtly different answer to a tricky question, if you smile more broadly or speak up a little bit more, the result can be completely different. At one interview you will leave with a job, whereas at another for the very same job you will leave feeling like a loser.

### Look the part

You are much better off then if you can think about graduate recruitment as being a type of audition. If you look the part, sound the part, have learned your lines, and have a little bit

of luck in terms of whom you end up being put up against and auditioned by, the starring role can always be yours.

*“Do you have the same sort of extracurricular pursuits for the culture of the organisation? Does your manner appeal? Does your face fit?”*

It might feel like the interviewers are assessing you by using some arcane, complex objective set of techniques and criteria, but what they are really doing is what interviewers have always done. They are asking if you will fit in. Do you have the same sort of extracurricular pursuits for the culture of the organisation? Does your manner appeal? Does your face fit?

Of course, this means that graduate recruitment is nowhere near as fair as a finals examination. And, given the amount of investment that the winners get in terms of salary, training and early responsibility, you might wonder whether the rewards they receive are really justified by the evidence on which they are picked. But that is very big question, and life just might not be fair.



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