

Helping Create a Level Playing Field

Jo Lawrence, Director at the Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC) shares initiatives, research and candidate's perspectives on some best practice approaches for inclusive talent acquisition



Fair candidate selection through online tools

Many organisations might pre-select based on application forms or CVs, but the OPC has collaborated with global clients to develop and refine efficient online pre-selection questionnaires that effectively and fairly assess key job characteristics. Scoring is automated so it's objective and standardised, saving time. Over the past two decades, the OPC has developed, tested, refined and validated a variety of successful formulas for pre-selecting candidates for high-volume recruitment campaigns.

Some sections that may be considered are:

- Non-negotiable questions that are a prerequisite for the role, e.g. 'Are you happy to wear a uniform?'
- Job preference questions exploring candidates' preferences and alignment with job demands.
- Role-specific questions exploring candidates' understanding of the role.
- Mini-situational judgement questions that simulate role-specific scenarios.
- Questions that explore candidates' knowledge of the organisation.

Jo Lawrence said: 'These pre-selection tools can be bespoke for each client and customisable for specific roles. Our validation research shows that performance on these pre-selection questionnaires can predict success in later stages, such as assessment centres, where different and in-depth tools are used to assess potential and aptitude.'

'Digital pre-selection in high-volume recruitment enhances fairness by removing bias related to age, gender, qualifications, or experience. The evaluation is focused solely on a candidate's responses, ensuring standardisation and a fair process. Many of the recommended assessment tools have undergone validation studies, confirming their effectiveness.'

Inclusive talent acquisition means hiring candidates based purely on their ability to perform a role successfully and effectively, without bias toward factors such as race, gender, age, or other personal characteristics. Fair selection and recruitment processes are crucial for creating a diverse workforce, which not only promotes equality but also enhances employee engagement, encourages creativity, and helps improve overall productivity. Ensuring that recruitment is based purely on skills and competency, rail companies can create an environment where employees from all backgrounds feel valued and empowered to succeed and contribute.

The role of a train driver is a prime example of inclusive recruitment where the only prerequisites are meeting the minimum age requirement. With an attractive opening salary, it stands as one of the rare

professions where candidates can 'walk in off the street' and apply without needing prior education or job experience. This openness makes it highly accessible, encouraging a wide range of applicants from different walks of life. Similarly, there are other roles in the rail industry with comparable recruitment patterns such as, signallers and train conductors. These also focus on candidates' ability to learn and perform the job, rather than requiring extensive qualifications or experience, making them ideal examples of how inclusive talent acquisition can work in practice.

However, with such a diverse applicant pool, how can we ensure that every candidate, with their unique abilities, experiences, and backgrounds, is fully supported to perform their best in any rail industry selection process. What can we do to create a level playing field for all candidates?

Practice materials for better preparation

We know candidates perform much better when they're supported. So, to help them do their best and demonstrate their full potential, it's important to provide practice materials ahead of psychological assessments. This allows candidates to experience a scaled-down version of the full test, which may carry similar items included in the real test. The OPC offers a wide range of off-the-shelf, and tailor-made practice materials. The UK rail industry, in particular, has some of the most comprehensive practice material resources for train driver applicants, considered among the best in business and commerce.

The OPC recently conducted research with a client to support their trainee Train Driver recruitment process using some custom-designed practice materials. For one practice material, findings revealed that over ninety per cent of candidates used them, with more than two-thirds finding them helpful. Nearly half reported feeling less anxious after reviewing the materials, and those who used them reported a ten to fifteen per cent boost in confidence. Additionally, anxiety levels significantly dropped among candidates who engaged with the practice resources.

Jo said: 'The OPC firmly believes that practice materials provide significant benefits for candidates preparing for tests. They help candidates perform to their best, reduce anxiety, and boost confidence by offering a clear understanding of what to expect – allaying fears. Additionally, practice materials promote inclusivity by giving every candidate an equal and fair opportunity to succeed in high-profile roles like that of a train driver.'

Inclusive training and support for neurodivergent candidates

Inclusion goes beyond gender, age, or ethnicity – it also encompasses those candidates who may be neurodivergent. It's

'As the talent acquisition landscape evolves, it's essential to continuously review and improve processes—whether through digital efficiencies, standardisation, or enhancing diversity and inclusion—to create a level playing field for all candidates.'



essential that these individuals are given the same opportunity to succeed in any role they pursue. The OPC collaborates closely with clients to support them in establishing fair and effective recruitment policies and processes as part of their recruitment. The OPC have consistently promoted best practices when recruiting neurodivergent candidates in the rail industry. During assessment centres, they work closely with both clients and candidates to ensure that appropriate adjustments are offered and implemented, accommodating the individual neurodivergence on a case-by-case basis.

Candidate workshops for better understanding

To support candidates applying for train driver roles, running workshops with the OPC and recruiting managers can be highly beneficial. These sessions can provide a detailed overview of the recruitment process, explain the purpose and use of psychometric tests, and outline key competencies for specific tests.

Workshops provide candidates with valuable tips, hands-on practice, and immediate feedback to help them improve their performance. Offering candidates these workshops can help enhance their preparation and success rates, complementing written practice materials, and creating a more comprehensive readiness for assessments. This approach helps level the playing field, especially for those less familiar with sitting psychological tests or who may otherwise be disadvantaged.

In addition to workshops, 'drop-in' clinics can provide a great opportunity for internal candidates to ask questions about the recruitment process. These clinics allow candidates to speak directly with recruiting managers and an OPC expert about the job role and assessment process, and trainers about the training for successful candidates.

Candidate feedback on a selection process redesign

The OPC recently helped redesign a mechanic apprenticeship programme to help the client improve diversity and inclusion, particularly aiming to attract more women and apprentices from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. As part of the project, the OPC gathered and analysed delegate feedback to understand their experiences with the new selection process. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, with nearly ninety per cent reporting a good experience, eighty-five per cent enjoying the process, and eighty per cent feeling valued. Impressively, eighty-eight per cent wanted to work for the client—even including those who didn't secure a role.

When asked about the online tests themselves, key insights found:

- Seventy per cent of candidates found the online tests relevant to the role.
- Seventy-one per cent said they didn't find the tests too challenging.
- Nearly 90 per cent of candidates found the test practice materials helpful.

This feedback highlights the importance of providing support in recruitment which can also provide better candidate experience.

Using psychometric tools with proven fairness

Jo Lawrence emphasised: 'Ensuring fairness and inclusivity in any recruitment process begins with confidence in your selection and development processes.'

OPC Assessment's commitment to this principle is evident through its extensive validation studies, ensuring the psychometric tools used in selection accurately predict job performance and training success. These studies can review entire selection processes or specific



‘The practice materials were useful and helped me to prepare in a test setting, very valuable!!!’

‘The practice materials eased my anxiety.’

candidate feedback

assessment tools, validating they accurately evaluate the desired skills and competencies they’re designed for.

For example, in a UK tram company project, the OPC used the Safe Concentration and Attention Test (SCAAT) for recruiting trainee tram drivers. The validation study demonstrated that higher scores on specific parts of the SCAAT were associated with better training performance, validating its effectiveness in predicting training success.

The Visual Search Exercise (VSE) was developed to help predict a train driver’s likelihood of safety incidents based on tendencies to operate in autopilot. Similarly, the validation study undertaken by OPC Assessment showed that some drivers involved in more safety incidents had poorer VSE performance, highlighting the VSE’s predictive value.

Additionally, OPC Assessment completed validation research across multiple train operators on the Magnificent 7 Situational Judgment Test (M7SJT). Studies confirmed the tool was valid across age, gender, and ethnicity. Thus, providing confidence that it not only helps select candidates with outstanding performance characteristics, but it also maintains fairness across a diverse applicant pool.

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Jo Lawrence said: ‘Validation studies are invaluable for our clients helping identify the tools that best predict job performance and training success. By removing ineffective tools, these studies help refine selection processes and ensure that the tools included accurately assess the desired role characteristics, ultimately enhancing job performance and training outcomes. Our expert psychologists can deliver timely and insightful validation recommendations, regardless of the complexity or size of the process.’

Structured interviews for an objective assessment

A structured interview follows a prescribed template with specific questions designed to probe and assess key role competencies with a clear method for gathering candidate evidence. It includes rating guides and decision-making tools for evaluating candidates prior to a final job offer. Given their structure, this method is highly effective at predicting future job performance.

However, to ensure fairness and accuracy, recruiters must be properly trained to conduct the interviews correctly, make accurate candidate assessments and therefore, informed recruiting decisions.


The OPC recommends providing candidates with an interview preparation form to help them reflect on relevant competency examples in advance. Interviewers are better prepared too as they can review the candidate’s examples before commencing the interview. Feedback from a client recruitment project showed that about ninety per cent of candidates found the form helpful, relevant, and that it enabled them to perform their best on the day. One candidate shared how they “loved this part of the process,” praising the form for the valuable insight it gave them into the role and their potential future.

Jo Lawrence explained: ‘The OPC only conducts structured interviews because, in our opinion, they are the ‘Gold Standard.’ When done correctly, similar to psychometric tests, they are highly accurate predictors of how a candidate will perform in role. Their structured template also avoids bias and inappropriate questioning during the interview – ensuring all candidates are treated equally and given a fair, consistent and respectful experience.’

Feedback and continuous improvement

In any selection process, especially with high-volume recruitment, it’s crucial to treat candidates as individuals and provide timely, constructive performance feedback at appropriate stages. This helps deliver a positive candidate experience and equips them for any future applications in the same organisation or elsewhere. Jo Lawrence noted: ‘Importantly, if a candidate is unsuccessful offering verbal feedback on what they can improve for next time – whether for the same role or another – can be very valuable.’

Jo concluded: ‘With over three decades of experience working in the rail industry, we’re committed to refining recruitment practices in psychological assessment. As the talent acquisition landscape evolves, it’s essential to continuously review and improve processes to create a level playing field for all candidates. We aim to support our clients and the industry in leading the way with effective, fair selection methods that benefit everyone.’

If you think the OPC can help you enhance your recruitment processes, get in touch with their friendly team. 



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