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## Behavioural assessments for clients explained

Contractors bidding for infrastructure work are increasingly being judged not just on price and quality, but on the way they behave. Edd Burton of Turner & Townsend and Marek Gitrowski of MDV Consulting explain the best way to approach behavioural assessments.

### 1. What are behavioural assessments?

Behavioural assessment is a selection technique that increasing numbers of infrastructure clients are incorporating into their procurement processes. They draw on many of the same principles as employee selection, and allow clients to vet potential contractors by asking them to demonstrate their approaches and behaviours in a realistic test scenario.

While not a brand new idea, the technique is rapidly gaining currency as a sophisticated way for clients to look beyond a bidder's price and past project portfolio, and to gauge whether their behaviour and working style will be a good fit in the project team.

They can be used to highlight areas in which bidders will perform better, as well as those they are likely to find more challenging. From the client's point of view, they are a useful tool not only in choosing the right bidder, but in maximising the likelihood of successful project outcomes.



### 2. What's the thinking behind them?

Behavioural assessments are designed to give the client a detailed snapshot of a bidder's "DNA" – in other words, how they will behave in practice. Unlike many aspects of a conventional tender process, they are predictive and future-focused.

By using qualitative and quantitative techniques, they measure the performance of the bidding teams in a series of baseline assessments – which give a guide to how the bidder is likely to work in the real world, and how they would handle challenges and setbacks. Underlying it all is the desire of clients to find a true partner with whom they can work collaboratively. Clients want to know not only that a contractor knows how to build their project, but also that they will work collaboratively, effectively and in partnership with them as this increases the likelihood of project success.

Behavioural assessments therefore allow clients to evaluate contractors on their "intelligent enquiry" skills – and their ability to take techniques that worked in different contexts and apply them to the needs of the existing situation.

In short, they are a way for the client to ensure that the contractor can walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

### 3. Which clients are using them?

The Environment Agency recently used behavioural assessments for the first time during the procurement of a 10 year contract for the delivery of capital improvement projects in the Thames Estuary.

Its programme director Peter Quarmby explains: *"Because of the long-term nature of the contract, we recognised that its success was likely to be heavily dependent on finding a partner whose organisational culture aligned with ours and whose key personnel could support the achievement of our objectives."*

The Environment Agency felt it would obtain valuable insight – and increase the chances of finding the right partner – by integrating behavioural assessment into its tender process, rather than relying on the more conventional approaches alone. As such, 25% of its award criteria were assigned to performance in the behavioural assessments.

Other infrastructure clients using the assessments as part of their procurement strategy include Highways England, BAA, Crossrail, Network Rail and Anglian, Thames and Welsh Water.

### 4. What do the assessments involve?

Behavioural assessments can take different forms, but traditionally involve competency-based interviews with the contractor's proposed leadership teams, written exercises and putting key personnel through a series of role-plays based on scenarios which are likely to occur during the delivery of the contract.

They often include group exercises to measure a group's way of working, how aligned and effective it is or to "stress test" how a joint venture will operate under pressure or time constraints.

When it comes to the role-play scenarios, it is common for "curve-balls" to be thrown into the mix to test how people react under pressure. This "stress-testing" is important because people will generally exhibit their true behavioural traits under a degree of pressure.

Clients would typically start by defining a competency framework – a set of desirable behaviours that are fundamental to project success – and then develop a range of realistic exercises to measure contractors' behaviour against these criteria. These behaviours are then broken down into positive and negative indicators, which then form the basis of the assessment criteria.

Job analysis techniques draw on the expertise of assessment psychologists to aid with the realism of the scenarios. At the same time, assessor training for objective observation supports the evidence-based decision making.

### 5. Who is being tested?

Clients typically assess the primary delivery teams (for example the project director, operations director, and client liaison lead). But as behavioural assessments become more popular, many are starting to assess the contractors' senior leadership teams too, as they are likely to set the tone and culture for how the project delivery teams will operate.

Some clients are even using them on second tier suppliers, as they believe creating greater alignment across the whole supply chain will enhance ways of working, creating more effective and responsive teams.

### 6. What are clients looking for?

At the risk of stating the obvious, they are looking for evidence that a bidder meets as many of the behavioural criteria as possible.

On a more fundamental level, they will want to identify bidders who they feel they can work with, and who are as engaged, proactive and motivated by the process as they are.

They'll also be looking for insightful and responsive management and leadership styles, and a range of different types of personnel within the contractor's proposed team; as having too many delivery-focused individuals or too many conceptual thinkers may result in aspects of the project underperforming.

### 7. Will contractors benefit from behavioural assessments (or are they just another hoop to jump through)?

The short answer is contractors will benefit from them – because those who are selected in this way will form the most effective project teams.

Ultimately, behavioural assessments will promote a more effective, responsive and intelligent way of working and interacting.

Of course the supply chain will invariably find some parts of the assessments to be challenging and other parts easier to navigate through.

But if approached positively, contractors can use the process to better understand their own people and identify where to develop them – it helps the contractor align performance – related behaviours with their own internal people processes through better recruitment and leadership decisions.

Given that the construction industry currently faces two major challenges – attracting new talent and increasing productivity – anything that fosters greater collaboration and enhanced client-contractor relationships should be welcomed.

## 8. How can contractors best prepare for these assessments?

As with all aspects of the tender process, preparation is key. Contractors should ensure that the team they are proposing meets the requirements set out in the tender documentation.

Furthermore, all personnel participating in assessments should clearly understand what the client is looking for and how they will be assessed.

However, the bad news for contractors is that it's very difficult to fake it. Because the assessments often include elements of psychometric testing and are evaluated by behavioural specialists – including psychologists – ultimately it's very difficult to cheat the process.

So contractors should consider very carefully the client's requirements, the objectives of the project, the working culture of the team and how the individuals they put forward will best fulfil the required skills and behaviours.

See the following box for some useful tips.

### Preparing for behavioural assessments

- Approach the experience as an opportunity to really understand how the required behaviours can demonstrate the suitability of your teams.
- Ask for clarification on areas you are not clear on. The whole supply chain needs to understand exactly what it is being asked to do, and what will lead to success in this stage of the assessment and throughout the contract.
- Be honest when reviewing your own starting line-up – evaluating your own team to establish if your people have the right fit with what is being asked for, and if not, provide some developmental support to help them improve their chances.
- Consider the types of exercises, scenarios and challenges you may face individually and collectively, and review ways to approach these.
- Reflect on previous project experience of what worked – and did not work – and consider the underlying behaviours that determined this outcome.
- Reflect on previous tenders for which you have bid unsuccessfully, and learn lessons to strengthen your approach this time round.

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<http://www.nce.co.uk/features/behavioural-assessments-for-clients-explained/8686462.article>

For more information please contact:  
Marek Gitrowski

**MDV**

Leadership and talent consultants

[www.mdvconsulting.co](http://www.mdvconsulting.co)