

## ROUND TABLE: BEHAVIOURAL ASSESSMENTS

# WALKING THE WALK

Increasingly clients are using behavioural assessments in their procurement processes. But are they just another box ticking exercise? **Michaila Hancock** reports on a recent NCE/Mabey Hire round table.

**B**ehavioural assessments are not a new thing, but their use by clients to assess contractors' behaviours is on the increase. In theory this should be a win-win situation for client and contractor, as it has the potential to identify the most effective project teams and the most productive partnerships. But is this always the case?

"I'm sceptical" said Steve Farmer, chief executive at Mabey Hire at a recent round table discussion on the subject convened by NCE and Mabey Hire. He likened the assessments to a first date. "You go along to a behavioural workshop and you're asked what your favourite colour is. Someone says blue and everyone else agrees."

"It's not a true representation. As the project commences we remember who pays our salary and we revert to type."

Severn Trent Water programme and project manager Richard Seago, who hadn't used behavioural assessments before, took it one step back and argued that "organisations need to consider their own behaviours first, before they can start to judge others".

Those around the table who had used behavioural assessments agreed, but added that it was not always that simple. Highways England procurement director Sharon Cuff said: "Because of the huge competing priorities for Highways England at the moment we have been using behavioural assessments. [But] the client has to understand that their behaviours need to be in the right place too if we

are going to meet our challenges.

"It would be naive to say that there are always the right behaviours within an organisation."

The process of assessment is not to be taken lightly continued Cuff. "It's a big commitment in terms of time, resources and energy. Thought needs to be put into how you think it is going to make a difference to what is being delivered, or the assessment is a complete waste of time if they are just completed as part of the procurement process and then forgotten."

When the Environment Agency's Thames Estuary programme director Peter Quarmby was asked about his experience of the assessments, he spoke of training managers in-house.

"Our solution was to use managers in our national development programme, who weren't necessarily experts in that field, so it allowed them to concentrate on observing the behaviours shown and learn from the process" he said. "Getting the right assessors is crucial."

Mike Vessey, managing partner at MDV Consulting, which designs and delivers

**"When we get to the assessment stage, it's just fine tuning. Learning about and applying behaviour is for life not just for Christmas"**

Alan Cheung, Costain



**Attitude question:** The discussion covered a range of views towards behavioural assessments

### ROUND TABLE ATTENDEES



**Tony Gates**  
new business  
director, Balfour  
Beatty



**Sharon Cuff**  
head of  
procurement,  
Highways  
England



**Peter  
Quarmby**  
Thames Estuary  
programme  
director,  
Environment  
Agency



**Steve Farmer**  
chief executive  
officer, Mabey  
Hire



**Tom Williams**  
director of  
engineering,  
Mabey Hire



**Tim Fitch**  
director,  
Invennt

behavioural assessments and trains assessors, denied he was part of a "cottage industry" that had emerged as the assessments became more common.

"We don't want to breed a dependency on consultants, but rather encourage in-house training of managers as assessors as they will know the business far better than us. Good behavioural assessor skills are also good line manager skills. Those internal resources should

be utilised."

Costain director of behavioural management Alan Cheung agreed. "We have spent the past nine years learning about behaviour and embedding it into our business," he said.

"When we get to the assessment stage, it's just fine tuning. Learning about and applying behaviour is for life not just for Christmas".

The design of the contract is as important as assessments



**"There is still a culture in the industry that contractors do not want to offend their clients"**

Nick Cleary,  
Galliford Try

earlier in the procurement process.

"If a customer is still developing their documents after the shutter has gone down and big surprises appear during the tender, contracts may end up being awarded to the best guesser."

Mabey Hire engineering director Tom Williams said he thought that work needed to be done to make sure that the whole supply chain was up to speed with a client's behavioural requirements .

"It takes a lot of work and consistency to filter those behaviours down through the chain. We haven't witnessed much change in the past few years, but those behaviours in larger projects we would like to see in smaller projects too".

Regardless of the contract award, the Environment Agency's Peter Quarmby thought there was a lot that could be learnt from the assessment process. "You need to give as much feedback as you can as there is always the potential of a future relationship. We do ourselves a disservice if we don't give feedback".

When the discussion turned to the best way to train future generations to display the correct behaviours, Invennt director Tim Fitch doubted they would even need behavioural training. "This generation is more naturally collaborative. We need to nurture, not train them. They are potentially great already".

**Graeme Castle**  
rail sector leader, Laing O'Rourke



**Richard Saego**  
programme and project manager, Severn Trent



**Alan Cheung**  
director of behaviour management, Costain



**Nick Cleary**  
managing director, highways, Galliford Try



**John Deehan**,  
principal consultant, Turner & Townsend



**Mike Vessey**  
managing partner, MDV Consulting



argued Laing O'Rourke's rail sector lead Graeme Castle. "The contract has to be an enabler, not a blocker, and everything needs to be aligned to get the right outcome. There's no point having behavioural assessments then a fixed price lump sum contract."

"It's about what's best for project outcomes," he continued. "[It's about] the right people with the right values and behaviours and aligned objec-

tives – getting rid of the barriers within contracts."

Galliford Try managing director, highways Nick Cleary disagreed. "It's not so much the contract" he argued, "but the rules, the procurement, the incentives that drive behaviours. If you say price is the most important thing, you'll get a cheap price. If you say behaviour is the most important part, but the price is the biggest mark, you're driving the wrong behav-

iours – giving mixed messages".

Mabey's Farmer was still to be convinced of the benefits of behavioural assessments.

"I'm pro- behaviours but you don't hire people and tell them to be nice to customers, you hire nice people that don't need training to go to behavioural assessment centres".

Vessey pointed out that it is important not to confuse behavioural assessments with collaboration.

"Collaboration is one of the areas you might measure as part of an assessment, but that shouldn't be confused with being sociable. There is a lot more to collaboration than being nice to people."

Galliford Try's Cleary said assessment were changing the industry's client-pleasing attitudes. "There is still a culture in the industry that contractors do not want to offend their clients.

"However, behavioural assessments are pushing away from this, and we are more critical of ourselves and the clients. Instead of offending we can actually help our clients get better".

When asked how relationships between clients and contractors could be improved Balfour Beatty new business director Tony Gates argued that more dialogue was needed

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