

By Brian Fitzgerald,
Atkins

Identifying career routes and key skills at Atkins

Increasing retention rates by fostering engagement with development plans

Introducing Management Development Centers enabled Atkins to map its employees' potential career routes by assessing their key capabilities and interests, explains Brian Fitzgerald, Atkins' director of HR development.

ATKINS, A GLOBAL CONSULTING, engineering and architectural consultancy, derives its strength from its people – their intellect and specialist skills. However, recruiting top talent is never the sole determinant of service quality; staff have to be deployed effectively and their output has to be monitored. Moreover, however talented an individual, there's always room for improvement.

It's important to gain an understanding of an employee's strengths and weaknesses. Once you've determined an individual's development needs you can focus on helping them move forward. With its Management Development Centers (MDCs), Atkins engaged with individuals on their capabilities, and emphasized the need to build on each person's strengths to maximize their contribution and address important areas for development.

Addressing talent management concerns

Since 2001, Atkins' MDCs, delivered in partnership with business psychologists Kaisen Consulting, have been addressing these issues. Atkins is a multi-faceted organization, offering expertise in areas such as transport, defence, aviation, health and so on. We employ talented people across a very wide range of disciplines.

The problem we were facing five years ago was related directly to the group's diversity of talent and its continuing success. Up until that time, Atkins' various operating divisions had been acting virtually autonomously with regard to performance management and career development procedures and processes. Since then, Atkins has continued to expand very rapidly and its strategic objectives have been changing in line with this continued growth.

In order to support these objectives, we realized we needed a more robust and cohesive approach to developing our people. We recognized that we should understand our employees' individual strengths and maximize the potential of our talent as a groupwide population rather than in specialist divisions. We also wanted to capture aggregate data to understand what we needed to do better collectively.

Acknowledging skepticism

Understandably, there was some initial skepticism about using a uniform set of metrics to assess the capabilities of a seemingly disparate group of specialists – how can you compare apples with oranges? However, these concerns were allayed following a pilot MDC.

When presented with the pilot's findings there was surprise – even the most sceptical of those who nominated the six individuals for the MDC pilot were amazed by the insights they were getting on their people. The reports provided in-depth commentary on capabilities including personal qualities, behavioral

preferences, personal style, mindsets and so on.

The fundamental principles and elements measured in the pilot event haven't changed; however, improvements have been made to make the whole process more efficient. Importantly, the understanding in the company of how to interpret and utilize the output reports has improved dramatically over time.

Designing the MDC program

Atkins' MDCs span two days with a maximum of six delegates. Kaisen Consulting's Rowan Bradford, explains their structure: "Day one focuses on assessing an individual's capabilities. Aside from a 360-degree appraisal, delegates complete a self-assessment questionnaire and undertake a number of psychometric tests, including tests to determine their thinking and reasoning skills. These activities are combined with an in-depth interview with a Kaisen psychologist.

"As well as assessing basic areas of capability, we also look at how the individual can be deployed in the most effective way. For instance, whether they're best suited to working abroad or in the UK, whether they're natural team players or prefer working independently, and insights into appropriate career direction. It's not a question of trying to impose particular characteristics on people or finding them wanting. We follow the premise that all delegates are talented; our aim is to find out how that talent can be used to maximum advantage, both to support Atkins' business objectives and the individual's career.

"It's all about concentrating on the positives. Engineers are, understandably, very concerned about precision and, when it comes to self-assessment, they have a tendency to be over-critical; highlighting their problem areas rather than their strengths. The MDCs obviously need to address 'room for improvement' issues, but the focus throughout is on identifying and helping to accentuate the individual's inherent qualities."

Following organizationwide principles

Fundamental to the design of the MDC are the following principles:

- **Robust and objective measurement:** Conclusions about an individual's capability are based not on a single source of information, but from a range of sources e.g., a combination of psychometric tests and questionnaires, an interview and a 360 degree survey.
- **Business focus:** Conclusions and feedback are set in the context of Atkins business requirements.
- **International senior management criteria:** on some elements participants are benchmarked against management capability in other international businesses.
- **Open feedback:** Participants receive full and open feedback including copies of all reports produced as a result of the process.

↓ ATKINS

Atkins is a major consulting, engineering and architectural group, which plans, designs and enables its clients' projects and programs, including conducting feasibility studies, designing systems, processes, buildings and civil structures. Atkins currently employs 14,000 people worldwide (10,500 based in the UK) and has an annual turnover of UK£1.15 billion.

↓ PERSONALITY AND THINKING SKILLS

The Personal Qualities focus on seven personality areas fundamental to effective workplace performance, together with two thinking skills; convergent and divergent thinking. These are core characteristics that tend to be relatively stable and hence require a relatively structured development plan to bring about change. The Personal Qualities are:

1. **Drive to achieve** – The extent to which an individual has a strong motivation to succeed and achieve good results.
2. **Openness** – The extent to which an individual is willing to accept uncertainty and their ability to adapt well to changing circumstances and ambiguity.
3. **Independence** – The extent to which an individual is willing and able to be assertive and express their views.
4. **Self-direction** – The extent to which the individual has an underlying sense of self-determination and willingness pursue their own goals.
5. **Openness to others** – The extent to which the individual is aware of the needs and interests of others.
6. **Sociability** – The extent to which the individual likes and enjoys working with others.
7. **Resilience** – The extent to which the individual is able to cope with stress and adjust to unsatisfactory conditions.

The Thinking Skills are:

1. **Convergent thinking** – The ability to identify patterns and draw logical conclusions from complex, unfamiliar information.
2. **Divergent thinking** – The ability to produce a variety of ideas and alternatives in response to a new or unusual situation.

- **Involvement:** Participants are encouraged to draw the main conclusions themselves, formulate their own development plans and present the results to senior management. This "engagement" concept, rather than "telling" leads to greater understanding by the participants and to increased ownership by them of their development plans.

Assessment of individuals taking part in an Atkins MDC is centered on a range of "Personal Qualities" and "Business Focus" areas (see *Personality and Thinking Skills* box above).

Establishing depth of thinking

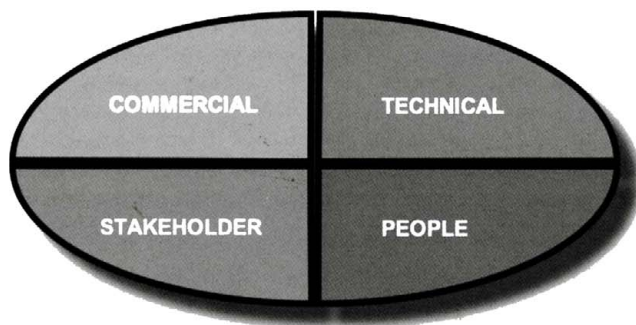
In addition to the Personal Qualities, the eight Business Focus areas key to delivering the strategic goals of the group are assessed. These Business Focus areas are:

Brian Fitzgerald

is director of HR development at Atkins. His areas of expertise include graduate and management assessment centers, psychometric testing, employee engagement initiatives, succession planning and talent management.



Figure 1. Atkins' "developing individuals" framework



1. Customer – Knowing how to identify and respond to customer needs.
2. Commercial – Knowing how to make profit from the products and services of the business.
3. Strategic – Knowing how to define the future direction for the business.
4. Performance management – Knowing how to keep people's performance on target.
5. Inter-cultural – Knowing how to fit in and work with different cultures and customs.
6. People – Knowing how to influence people.
7. Political – Knowing how to use the internal political system to achieve objectives.
8. Risk management – Knowing how to avoid exposing the organization to risk.

Identifying know-how in these eight key areas aims to establish the breadth and depth of thinking in relation to specific business areas using "mindsets" – mental models for certain areas. Mindsets measure knowledge or awareness and can therefore be developed through study, experience or training. The extent to which they are applied is dependent on personal qualities and motivation. Each participant on an MDC program receives:

1. A personal profile report that includes:
 - A summary resumé.
 - A commentary written by the business psychologist summarizing the individual's profile strengths. This is based on patterns identified from the psychometric tests and questionnaires, mindset assessment, the individual's biography and their direct experience of the individual on the day. Each strength is described and explained precisely. An indication of how the individual can maximize their contribution and build on their strengths is also included.
 - A list of personal challenges including an outline of areas to work on.
2. A psychometric report providing further detailed information and results on the personality questionnaires and tests.
3. A survey feedback report which summarizes the

results of the online 360-degree survey distributed to bosses, colleagues and subordinates.

Development discussions not only focus on building on individual's strengths but also provide an opportunity for them to take a pause from their day-to-day workload and think about long-term career options.

Spreading the knowledge

By implementing a talent identification program such as the MDCs, the Atkins group can harness its employees' diverse skills and ensure individuals are engaged to best effect, for the individual and the organization.

Atkins is diverse in the skills it needs and is dispersed geographically. This breadth of skills and locations means that careers are not just restricted to business management but also afford other possible routes.

Therefore, rather than making the mistake of "force feeding" individuals up the business management career ladder (appropriate for some), aspirations and development plans can also be focused on progress via expertise in project management or technical capability. This variety of career options makes the company a very attractive place for professionals to not only utilize their current skills but also to have a fulfilling longer term career without having to leave the Atkins group.

"We follow the premise that all delegates are talented; our aim is to find out how that talent can be used to maximum advantage"

Atkins has ensured that the MDC experience involves delegates' active participation; it's not a matter of simply testing people. The full and open feedback on the results of the process encourages delegates to draw out for themselves the main messages which can then be used to create a realistic development plan. The final element involves managers making a presentation to their senior managers. This ensures that all parties have a clear understanding about the way forward and has the added benefit of raising the visibility and profile of participants among the senior management population.

Retaining employees: generating surprise results

But the story doesn't end there. MDCs have also yielded other major benefits for Atkins. It's no good finding and developing talent if you can't hang on to it. Talented people are usually ambitious and if they don't think they're being looked after appropriately they'll go elsewhere.

Retaining employees is not always just about money,

as the MDC initiative has shown. Turnover among those who've taken part in an MDC is much lower when compared with turnover among those who haven't. Atkins' overall annual staff turnover is in the double digits, turnover in the MDC population is two percent – a significant achievement.

These results demonstrate the power of the MDC in fostering greater engagement between Atkins and its talent. There's top level buy-in from the board down, and the message to those going through an MDC is "Let's stop the Atkins world for two days – this is all about you and what you want to become." This practical demonstration of our commitment to helping our people progress is being reciprocated by their loyalty: we're all winners.

Introducing additional programs

Atkins' MDCs are currently attended by approximately 160 managers annually, not just from the UK but also from other parts of the world, and there's an extensive waiting list. There's now a similar program for the company's graduates, Graduate Development Centers (GDCs), and the results have been equally positive – better mapping of career paths and improved retention. Turnover among the GDC population is down to five percent per year.

As the MDCs and GDCs have grown in reputation as key elements in talent management and development, the need to provide high-quality training has also been recognized.

In partnership with top level providers, including UK-based institutions Cranfield University School of Management and Ashridge Business School, a state of the art suite of courses has been developed, based around Atkins' four key areas of knowledge and skills needed to maintain and grow our business. These four sectors are: commercial, technical, stakeholder and people (see Figure 1, left). The courses are accessible to all, not restricted solely to MDC and GDC participants. Commercial and project management courses are now being rolled out for Atkins employees in Dubai and in Houston, USA.

Hence talent management and development isn't just focused on particular populations within the workforce and Atkins is enhancing skills throughout the organization. For Atkins, talent management is seen as a business imperative and is playing a great part in the Atkins success story – for individuals, the company is now perceived as a great place to work and one in which everyone's talent is valued.



KEY POINTS:

- During a period of fast-paced growth, Atkins realized it needed a robust program to identify and utilize its employees' diverse range of key skills and areas of expertise.
- The company piloted a Management Development Center (MDC) program to provide in-depth insights into individuals' personal capabilities and behavioral preferences.
- Following a successful trial of the program, MDCs identified a range of personal qualities and business focus areas fundamental to effective workplace performance at Atkins.
- Each participant on an MDC program receives a psychometric report summarizing their particular strengths and areas that can be worked on.
- The MDCs have enabled Atkins to deploy its employees in areas and activities where the most effective outcomes will be achieved. Turnover of staff among MDC participants is much lower compared to those who haven't participated.
- Having acknowledged the success of the MDCs, Atkins introduced Graduate Development Centers (GDCs) to map the career paths of its graduate intake. This program has proved similarly positive, with turnover among the GDC population down to five percent per annum.

→ CONTACT

Brian Fitzgerald

E-mail: brian.fitzgerald@atkinsglobal.com