

# THE QUALITY OF THE VALIDATION ASSESSOR

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Conducting a validation assessment has gradually become a real profession. Not just anyone can do that. How can we objectively establish and guarantee the quality of the entire validation process, and especially the quality of the assessor?

'The best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour.' (Wernimont & Campbell, 1968). Everyone involved in validation pathways knows this. Yet it is not natural to act accordingly. When an assessor presents fictitious cases to a candidate in an interview, she/he does not investigate the candidate's competences but examines his/her views and ideas. In such a situation, it seems like talking about concrete and relevant work situations. Yet such questions give more information about the candidate's insight and views than they give a picture of what the candidate can do. Thus, an interview can be structured but still miss the mark when it comes to predictive value (Linnenbank & Speelman-Tjoeng, 2009).

In this article, we want to discuss some professional challenges about the quality of the validation assessment. We focus in particular on the quality of the validation assessor.

## Introduction

### Taxonomies

Validation is used to establish professional competences of candidates. This is usually done in a situation where professionals need proof of being competent in a profession. They do not have the required diploma but are professionally competent. Validation is a method to demonstrate that professional competence.

Validation should not be used for a diploma route. Determining someone's professional competence is something completely different from taking an exam to obtain a diploma. For as long as there has been validation in The Netherlands, this tension or discrepancy has been felt. Graduation normally takes place immediately after a learning pathway. A diploma pathway shows that the candidate has learned enough to be qualified. The diploma is proof that the candidate is fit to start in a profession: a starting certificate of competence. Mastering the profession then grows over the years. The knowledge, skills and insights acquired during training integrate through practical experience into a whole that we call 'competent' (*About Entry Level Competent, Skilled and Skilled Adult: Knowing how the Hares run*, Erik Kaemingk and Annie Kempers 2020).

A validation pathway takes place the moment someone has shown in professional practice that he or she can act at a professionally mature level, regardless of the learning pathway followed. A validation trajectory tests this professional maturity. The competences of a professional are tested in a validation process based on the professional or sector standards and the transversal competences, which are based on the European Quality Framework (EQF).

An assessment is made as to whether the candidate performs the profession, in part or, in such a way as to meet those standards. It also assesses whether the result of the candidate's

work is accepted by his direct stakeholders (colleagues, management, clients). The quality of a validation pathway is the resultant of the candidate's performance and the acceptance of that performance by the candidate's professional environment.

### Problem definition

But how can we be sure that a validation pathway is adequately implemented? What does it take to show that an observation or validation of/by the assessor matches the objective indicators of the standards? By what can we see or measure that during the validation trajectory, the candidate's behaviour has been adequately tested so that it establishes the candidate's professional competence and thus future competent action can be expected? For this, we need to control the quality of the entire validation process and establish the professional competence of the assessor. This is necessary to realise that candidates are treated fairly. On the one hand, the aim should be to make all the candidate's competences visible, while at the same time avoiding attributing competences to the candidate that he/she does not have.

In this article, we describe some aspects related to the quality of the validation assessment. It addresses several salient facets that are drawn from the authors' current affairs and find confirmation in observations from the Dutch National Knowledge Centre for Validation. We focus on two aspects: the quality of the assessor and the quality of professional standards. We ask what is needed on the assessor's side (regarding interviewing, assessment, and reporting format) and what is needed on the professional profile description side.

### The validation interview and the role of the assessor

In a validation interview, the assessor examines the effectiveness of the candidate's actions in the professional context based on concrete experiences of the candidate. The assessor determines the candidate's competences in terms of (concrete and observable) behaviour; the result of that behaviour and the extent to which stakeholders accept the behaviour and the result. At the same time, the assessor determines the candidate's cross-professional behaviour (in popular terms, the working and thinking level). Concrete observable behaviour, result, and acceptance as the three components of a competence (Competent HTNO 2004).

During the assessment, the assessor invites the candidate to explain and elaborate on the (professional) behavioural aspects, the result of the professional action and the acceptance by the stakeholders based on, for example, case studies. He/she purposefully gathers the right information and uses his/her professional knowledge to invite the candidate to reflect on their own professional practice. The assessor uses a variety of methods such as the STARR methodology, appreciative inquiry, having the candidate reflect on professional dilemmas, portfolio documents and explanations during a workplace visit.

It is imperative that the assessor establishes and monitors equality aspects of the participants in the interview according to the transactional analysis model: avoiding the 'above' and the 'below' roles and together fleshing out the common goal: mapping the candidate's

competences ("Professional Standard Learning Pathway Independent Validation Assessor"). Such an approach promotes reassurance in a process that is challenging for the candidate. For the assessor, it is a balancing act: when it comes to contacting the candidate, the initiative may come from the assessor. If the assessor takes a wait-and-see and detached attitude, there is a chance that the candidate will not give all the information that is needed. An unbiased and inquisitive attitude on the part of the assessor is a prerequisite to ensure that the candidate feels invited to take the initiative in the interview. The interview has three phases: gathering information, exploring potential, and reflecting on the results of the interview ('Sociology for practice' Hoeksema and van der Werf).

The choice of assessment tools is important. For instance, a competency-based interview can work very well to map, directly linked to the indicators of the standard, the candidate's performance, and acceptance. At the same time, this is also the limitation of a competence-based interview: there is a danger that the interview funnels and frames and therefore lacks a holistic view of the candidate's competences. Another, and in our opinion preferable, approach is to look for experiences in the broadest sense that have guided the candidate's development. An interview focusing on what the candidate has gained in terms of knowledge and experience in the broadest sense throughout his/her life and career can reveal competences that are not highlighted at a competence-based interview. 'People with unique skills and abilities ... often don't know they are talented unless we tell them so.' (Mary-Anne Neal, EdCan Network).

However, there are more methods that can be used to find out what a candidate can do: simulation, discussion and debate can also make competences visible during the assessment interview. Looking for methodological foundations and justification of professional behaviour in professional situations can make candidates' theoretical insights visible. Having candidates reflect on professional dilemmas is a rich source to gain insight into self-direction and contributions to the development of the profession.

One of the pitfalls for the assessor is if he/she adopts an approach of, for instance, presenting fictitious cases to a candidate and having him/her reflect on them. In that case, however, the assessor does not investigate the candidate's competences, but he/she gets to hear (often general) views and ideas of the candidate. In such a situation, it seems as if concrete and relevant work situations are being discussed, but views of the candidate do not give a picture of what the candidate can do based on past experiences. The assessor uses his/her own knowledge to invite the candidate to reflect on his/her own practical situations.

So, a validation interview can be structured but still miss the mark when it comes to its predictive value regarding competent action in professional practice. We note that the profession of validation assessor is a profession that one must learn. For a validation-assessor too, she/he must grow from entry-level competent to professional competent to professional maturity. To establish professional maturity objectively, the Dutch National Knowledge Centre for Validation has developed the Professional Standard Learning pathway-independent Validation-assessor. The professionally mature assessor demonstrates compliance with its

indicators through a certification process and recording the result in a professional register with the Dutch Examination Chamber.

## Professional and industry standards and the Dutch standard for transversal competences

The quality of the description of the professional profile is of utmost importance. To objectively portray the candidate's performance in professional practice, the competence and level descriptions in the professional standard should be defined in a concrete and measurable (smart) way. However, the indicators of the current professional standards are not all defined as behaviour-based anchored rating scales, and the weight of the indicators may differ from one another. Overly prescriptively defined indicators can lead to looking at the 'wrong' manifestations of successful behaviour and to candidates who are successful in professional practice 'failing' an assessment. This certainly applies to candidates who have followed their learning pathway in practice. They have in many cases developed professional behaviour with a high level of acceptance among their stakeholders.

## Assessing and interpreting

The assessor relates the information from the assessment interview to objective measures: the occupational/sectoral standards and the Standard for Transferal Competences. The assessment should be logical and seamlessly match the indicators of the professional standard.

One form of assessment that we frequently encounter in practice is 'counting' the observed behavioural indicators mentioned in the professional standards. For example, if a plus can be given on 80% of the indicators, this establishes the competence as 'sufficient'. What is wrong with counting and measuring? What we object to is that the 'weight' of the indicators can differ greatly from one another. It may happen that the 80% is achieved but that, in the assessor's opinion based on his knowledge of the professional field, the most important indicator is not included. Herein lies the danger of candidates in the professional field failing at crucial moments.

It is essential that the assessor is competent to interpret and weigh what is stated in the professional standard. The assessor should therefore have a helicopter view of the profession and its methodological framework. It helps to standardise the assessment as much as possible. A structured interview method or practice simulation provides concrete information. Depending on how 'smart' the behavioural indicators and their levels are described in the standard, the methodical collection of information during the validation pathway provides sufficient information for assessment.

For an objective justification of the results of a validation pathway, it is important that the assessment of competences in terms of behaviour-results-acceptance are described in

descriptive terms, without mixing with value judgements of the assessor and in accordance with the Dutch validation writing guide. Once everything has been assessed and the assessment written, interpretation can begin. Interpreting is giving meaning to the assessment in the context of the candidate's question or objective. By creating distance between assessment and interpretation in this way, development recommendations can also be formulated for the candidate.

To increase the reliability of the assessment and its interpretation, it is recommended to work with (at least) two assessors. Skilled assessors use the opinion of their co-assessor to reach a balanced judgement. During some validation trajectories, discussions are also held with colleagues and supervisors. Candidates may be asked to reflect on feedback from colleagues. This too can significantly increase the reliability of the assessment.

One way to ensure assessment quality is to standardise as much as possible the tools and methods used in validation. The better the professional standard describes the competences in terms of content and level, the better the quality and comparability of the assessment. The same applies to the techniques used to gather information from and about the candidate: the competency-based interview, the assessment interview, the STARR method and elaborate practical simulations with assessment scales. Standardisation contributes to the reliability of outcomes.

A dilemma arises when we realise that validation is a method to establish learning pathway-independent competences that do justice to a candidate's degree of professional competence. This is hard to reconcile with a standardised and protocolled pathway. The chance of missing a competence if the protocol is strictly followed is not inconceivable. A competent assessor knows how to deal with this dilemma fruitfully. To describe a validation assessment objectively and reproducibly, assessors themselves need to operate at a professional mature level. They must be able to assess (independently of the professional standard) whether the candidate's behaviour-result-acceptance sufficiently predicts that the candidate will act professionally in the future. Only then can they see right through the professional profile and assessment scales/indicators and make a fair judgment in a validation process. Transparency of the validation process is achieved by using certified assessors, using professional standards and the Dutch standard for Transferal Competences, and following the Dutch validation writing guide.

## Skilled professionals as assessors

Applying and interpreting professional standards require insight and a helicopter view of the field. In principle, someone who is skilled in performing a competence-based interview and has an adequate portfolio of the candidate can perform a validation trajectory and come to an assessment, if the behavioural indicators are clearly and concretely described. However, to uncover all competences and explore development opportunities together with the candidate, assessors need to have a broad repertoire of validation instruments at their disposal, demonstrate an inquisitive attitude and use a descriptive reporting style. Candidates



have the right to professional peers as assessors who are above the subject matter and have also proven to be competent assessors.

## Conclusion

In our view, the profession of 'validation-assessor' deserves professionalisation. We note that the profession of validation-assessor is a profession to be learned. Especially in view of the great importance of a validation pathway for the candidate's career development. And because a validation-assessor determines the professional competence of professionals independently of the candidate's employer. The Dutch National Knowledge Centre for Validation has developed a professional standard for the Learning Pathway Independent Validation Assessor which aims to ensure that assessors guarantee their quality by demonstrating that they meet the indicators of this standard. In our opinion, the added value for the labour market is obvious: of importance for candidates; for the participants in the Labour Foundation (employer and employee organisations and several ministries) and for the professional group of assessors itself. A national register makes the professionalisation of validation-assessors visible and thus safeguards the quality of the profession. Skilled validation-assessors who have demonstrated that they meet the indicators of the professional standard Learning pathway-independent validation-assessor will be included in this register.

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