

ADDING VALUE TO THE RECRUITMENT OF SENIOR HEALTH SERVICE MANAGERS: A VALUES-BASED RECRUITMENT TOOL

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE:

'Values' of Health Service Managers (HSMs) can be identified by a central organising concept of leadership, which is underpinned by emotional intelligence. Values, whether conscious or not, serve as guiding principles that shape and influence behaviour. Utilising Values-Based Recruitment (VBR) increases the likelihood of hiring the right HSM with values that align with their organisation's values. This paper reports on the development of a 360 Degree Values-Based Reference Tool (360 VBRT).

DESIGN:

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology was adopted to iteratively develop a deep understanding of the values held by HSMs, identify ways to assess values and develop solutions to enhance recruitment processes. This study has taken a pragmatic approach, building on previous work that recommended organisations should adopt a values-based recruitment framework, which includes values-based assessment tools. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used as an inductive approach to identify and interpret patterns within the data. Building on the foundation constructed in previous research, this study sought to develop and enhance the 360 VBRT.

RESULTS:

By integrating insights from multiple referees, the 360 VBRT offers a comprehensive understanding of the applicant's values. This strengthens the recruitment process and improves the likelihood of selecting the most suitable HSM. Identifying candidates whose values align with an organisation's values, alongside skills, knowledge and experience, supports recruiting the right person to the right role.

CONCLUSION:

This study demonstrates that inclusion of the 360 VBRT has potential to enhance recruitment by increasing the likelihood of appointing a HSM whose values align with their organisation's values. This study highlights the need to identify values of HSMs during recruitment to enhance recruitment suitability. Employees whose values align with an organisation are more likely to be motivated, authentically lead teams, contribute to enhanced service performance, deliver high-quality care, which improves outcomes for consumers.

KEYWORDS

Values; health service manager; values-based recruitment; reference checking; leadership; participatory action research.

INTRODUCTION

Recruiting a Health Service Manager (HSM) whose values align with the organisational values – in addition to their skills, knowledge, and experience – supports strong leadership, a positive workplace culture and enhances provision of high-quality healthcare. An investigation into failings of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust was instrumental in the development of Values-Based Recruitment (VBR). The inquiry, led by Robert Francis QC, was conducted as there were concerns regarding the mortality rate and number of complaints compared to other NHS Trusts. The Francis report [1], identified widespread issues including systematic failures in management, poor leadership and a negative culture tolerant of poor standards of care, which ultimately led to significant harm to health service consumers. There were many recommendations from the report including putting consumers first, improving healthcare standards and workplace behaviour, developing a common culture with shared values, and recruiting a workforce whose values are congruent with the organisational values.

Values-Based Recruitment (VBR) is a flexible approach to recruitment that enables diverse methods of assessment with a focus on identifying applicants whose values align with their organisation. The aim of VBR is to recruit a workforce that fosters compassionate, person-centred care and ethical practice [2]. The literature [3] suggests that VBR has benefits that include reducing recruitment costs as a result of lowering staff turnover, increasing staff morale, job satisfaction, and improving workplace culture. A values-aligned workforce enhances organisational effectiveness whilst also contributing to positive outcomes for staff, consumers and the broader community [4]. By aligning management with service values, organisations are better positioned to foster a positive culture and psychological safety, ultimately improving healthcare service delivery and quality of care [5,6]. As such, this research contributes to the body of knowledge on HSM recruitment and enhances the VBR framework with the addition of the 360 Values-Based Reference Tool (360 VBRT) that was developed as part of this study.

A previous in-depth discussion of the first two Participatory Action Research (PAR) cycles of this study [7] provides background to this paper. Data analysis from PAR cycles one and two found that values of senior HSMs were identified by a central organising concept of leadership which is underpinned by emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence has been described as the ability to perceive, understand, manage and regulate your own emotions, ultimately guiding thinking and behaviour (8). Within the concept of leadership, the study found that HSMs embody a range of values that promote effective, person-centred ethical leadership. These values included honesty, authenticity, compassion, kindness, integrity, curiosity, courage, trustworthiness, hope and optimism.

This paper reports on the third and fourth PAR cycles including development of the 360 VBRT. PAR cycle three explored the values-based reference tool, its content and usability. PAR cycle four invited research participants to trial the tool, using a fictional person of their choosing, to assess how well the reference tool worked.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a PAR methodology which is an iterative process that facilitates ongoing feedback by actively involving the same participant group through a series of action cycles comprised of plan, act, observe and reflect [9]. PAR builds knowledge iteratively through successive cycles, it is a dynamic and progressive process of co-constructing knowledge to inform action [10]. Each PAR cycle was grounded in the participants' practical wisdom and supported through iterative member checking to validate themes at each focus group. Consistent with the work of Lindhult [11], this adaptive methodology provided reliability as a dynamically regulated process which facilitated consensus, guided progression through each PAR cycle, acknowledged the subjective and active role of researchers and ensured findings were representative of the participants' voice.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) developed by Braun and Clarke [12], was used to identify and interpret patterns within the data. Analysis included constant comparison of data, systematic coding and iterative theme refinement to maintain

internal consistency and reliability. Initial codes were generated, themes were identified and represented by central organising concepts which were presented as thematic diagrams to facilitate discussion and gain consensus. Regular review by the three-member research team strengthened reliability and the co-construction of knowledge. This inductive method of data analysis provided a systematic and reflexive approach to identify items of interest and refine analysis. RTA enabled a systematic and reflexive approach, strengthening reliability through transparent analytic processes and acknowledging researcher subjectivity. Ongoing researcher reflexivity, supported through a research diary and thematic diagrams, enhanced credibility and analytic rigour by validating interpretations to ensure they were representative of the participants voice. RTA considers the researchers' role in knowledge production at the core of this approach as it is collaborative and reflexive, enabling a richer, more nuanced understanding of the data [13].

Leading on from the Gregory et al. [7] study, a 360 VBRT was co-designed to support identification of candidate values as part of recruitment. By integrating perspectives of multiple referees, the 360 VBRT provides a rich and robust understanding of applicants, strengthening recruitment and reducing potential bias.

PAR cycle three focus groups reviewed the 360 VBRT. This interactive process provided rich data that enabled further refinement to the reference tool. PAR cycle four trialled and evaluated the revised 360 VBRT to assess its content, function and usability. The evaluation survey sought information that enabled further enhancement and finalisation of the 360 VBRT.

PARTICIPANTS

The participant cohort comprised a total of 18 (n=18) senior HSMs from diverse professional backgrounds and health settings across Tasmania (Australia), which encompassed metropolitan, rural, and remote areas. Importantly, the cohort were knowledgeable and experienced in recruitment. The diversity of the participant group provided both breadth and depth of collective wisdom which strengthened the co-designed values-based reference tool. See Figure 1 for number of participants by profession, Figure 2 for region of management and Table 1 for participant area of health speciality.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS BY PROFESSION

Profession	Number	Profession	Number
Registered Nurse	5	Psychologist	1
Administration	3	Social Worker	1
Medical Practitioner	2	Scientist	1
Physiotherapist	2	Occupational Therapist	1
Health Consumer	1	Specialist Therapist	1

FIGURE 2: REGION OF MANAGEMENT.

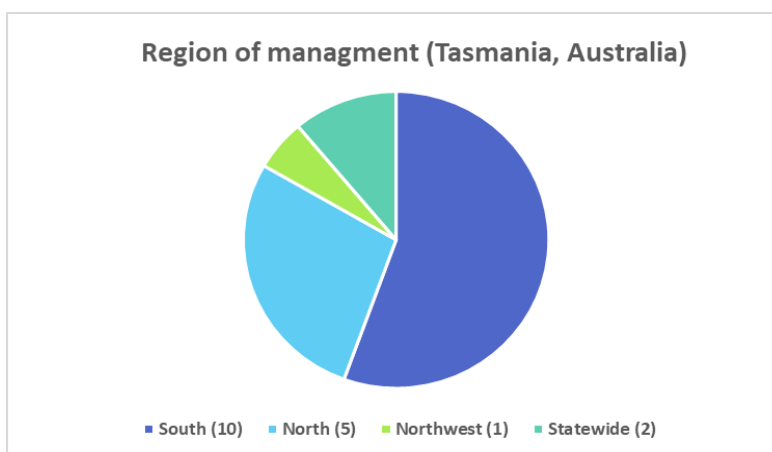


TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT AREA OF HEALTH SPECIALTY

Participant area of health speciality		
Mental health (n=3)	Critical care (n=1)	Child and parenting health (n=1)
Primary health (n=1)	Radiology (n=1)	Pathology (n=1)
Medical administration (n=1)	Education (n=2)	Recruitment / HR (n=2)
Health reform (n=1)	Clinical regulation (n=1)	Quality and safety (n=1)
Consumer (n=1)	Healthcare supplies (n=1)	

In total, 18 participants engaged in cycles one, two, three and four. Due to other commitments, not every participant joined every cycle. There were two focus groups per cycle, with an average of nine participants per group in the first three PAR cycles and ten in PAR cycle four. The stages for PAR cycles three and four were between August 2023 and May 2025.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Tasmania, Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: 26793) and the Tasmanian Department of Health, Research Governance Office.

RESULTS

PAR CYCLE THREE

The 360 VBRT seeks three different professional references that have direct knowledge of the applicant: a subordinate, peer and manager. Additionally, the applicant completes the 360 VBRT as a self-assessment. The insights from all four people aims to provide a holistic view of the applicant's skills, knowledge, experience and values. The 360 VBRT was trialled by research participants in this cycle and evolved as the study progressed. Participant responses were thematically analysed to inform and strengthen the subsequent refinement and next iteration of the 360 VBRT. The responses from PAR cycle three are summarised in Table 2.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF PAR CYCLE THREE FEEDBACK ON THE 360 VBRT

Summary of PAR cycle three feedback on the 360 VBRT	
Theme	Sample of participants' responses
Usability and usefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant R '... really like the ability to select performance on a scale as opposed to lots of free text.' Participant J 'I really like the tool ... I can see how you can adjust this and take it back to whole of agency values.' Participant E 'it's effective ... it doesn't require me to sit and think of words ... I decide and tick a box ... it might look like there's a volume, like in terms of size it might look big, but in terms of just ripping through it, it wouldn't be too bad at all.' Participant B 'getting overwhelmed by the number of check boxes ... opportunity to consolidate the volume of values.' Participant S 'I think the cohort is gonna be really motivated ... they've said yes to being a referee.' Participant H 'good to have a place to add some comments that are text based, there might be something that the referee wants to comment on that isn't covered'
Appropriate content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant R 'good representation across the qualities you'd want to see in a leadership position.'

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant B 'it covers all bases ... loved the question (would you be happy to work with this applicant again? If no, why not?) ... yes or no gives you a lot.' Participant S 'to validate ... you need the duplicate questions ... repeat questions gives you a kind of nicer, richer response and you see where the outliers are'
Clear and simple language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant F 'wording may be too subjective (uses appropriate humour)' Participant B '... should be objectified a little more ... concepts may not be understood by people ... without understanding what it's made up of.' Participant L 'I don't understand what ... trauma informed manner means (don't use concepts)'
Collating references from different cohorts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant K 'I would look at where the referee report was coming from and take that into account ... I may weigh more from one referee than another ... it would depend on the position that you're recruiting to.' Participant F 'four of these from different individuals trying to marry them up and interpret them against each other ... who would you weigh more ... and what if there is a marginal discrepancy ... (follow up in second interview ... which is not unusual when recruiting higher level managers)' Participant B 'self-rating, potentially being a red flag or offering further insights into someone's lack of insight or self-critical nature ... we like the concept of self-reference report'

Data analysis and synthesis enhanced the 360 VBRT, this enabled consolidating similar statements to reduce repetition and improve user experience. Simple, clear, and concise language was used, any reference to concepts were removed. Participants were invited to trial the revised 360 VBRT in PAR cycle four. Table 3 provides a sample from the 360 VBRT trialled in PAR cycle four.

TABLE 3: SUMMARY SAMPLE OF THE 360 VBRT

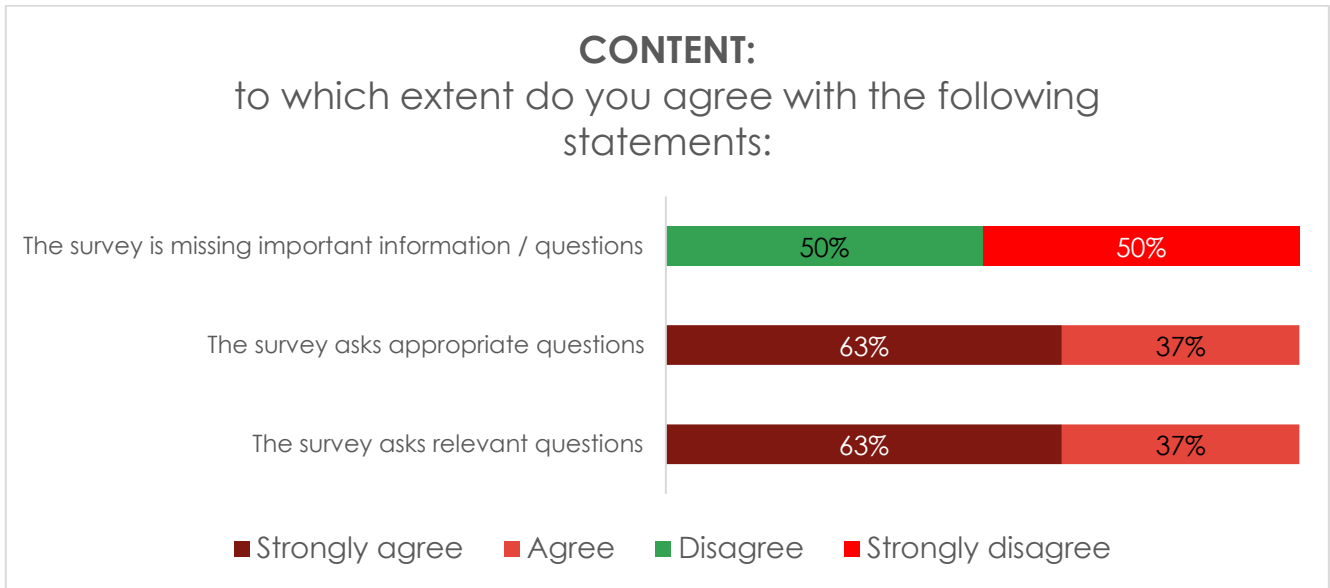
360 VBRT – sample					
General applicant and referee information ...					
Values-Based Reference: From your experience and to the best of your knowledge, please rate how often the applicant demonstrates the following:					
Personal: Item (15 in total)	Always	Usually	Rarely	Never	Unknown
Excellent interpersonal skills and ability to connect well with others					
Team: Item (12 in total)	Always	Usually	Rarely	Never	Unknown
Is a positive role model that leads by example					
Strategic: Item (12 in total)	Always	Usually	Rarely	Never	Unknown
Implements meaningful change and deals with uncertainty					
Broad questions and general comments ...					

PAR CYCLE FOUR

The fourth cycle focused on assessing the effectiveness of the 360 VBRT. An anonymous link was sent to participants; the tool was completed 13 times as there was an option to repeat it. Participants were invited to trial the tool using a fictional person of their choosing. For ethical reasons, researchers decided that participants should not use details of any real person, as this study is researching the usability of the tool. A second anonymous survey was sent to participants, inviting them to complete the 360 VBRT – process evaluation. Ten of the original 18 participants remained in PAR cycle four, eight were no longer contactable.

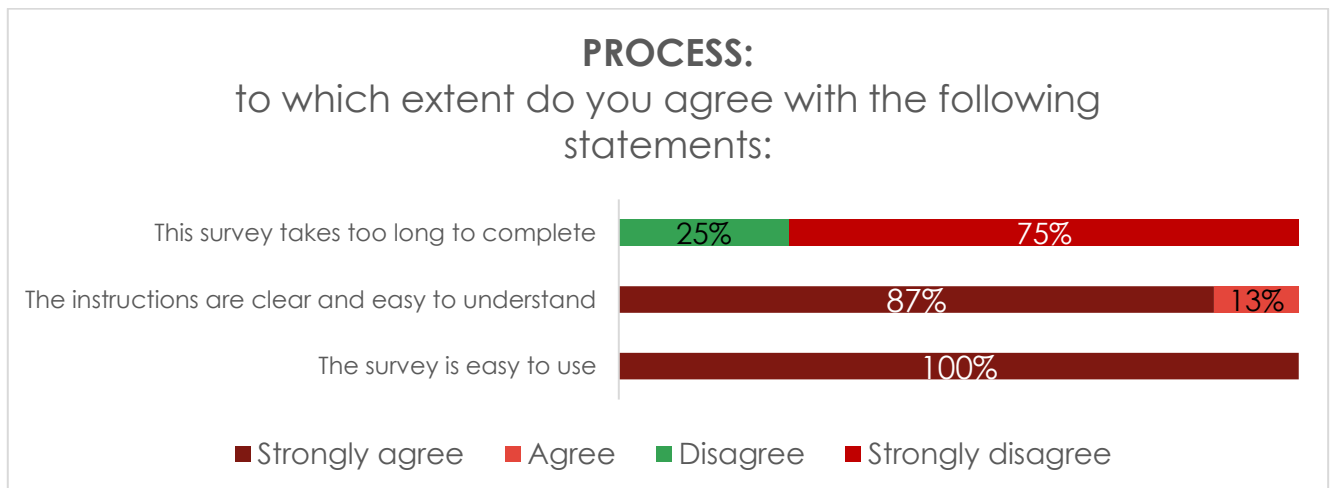
After participants trialed the 360 VBRT, PAR cycle four focused on exploring four domains of evaluation including content, process, sustainability, and outcome. The 'process evaluation' survey was completed eight times, an 80% response rate. Figures 3 – 6 present the results of the survey by domain.

FIGURE 3: 360 VBRT PROCESS EVALUATION: CONTENT



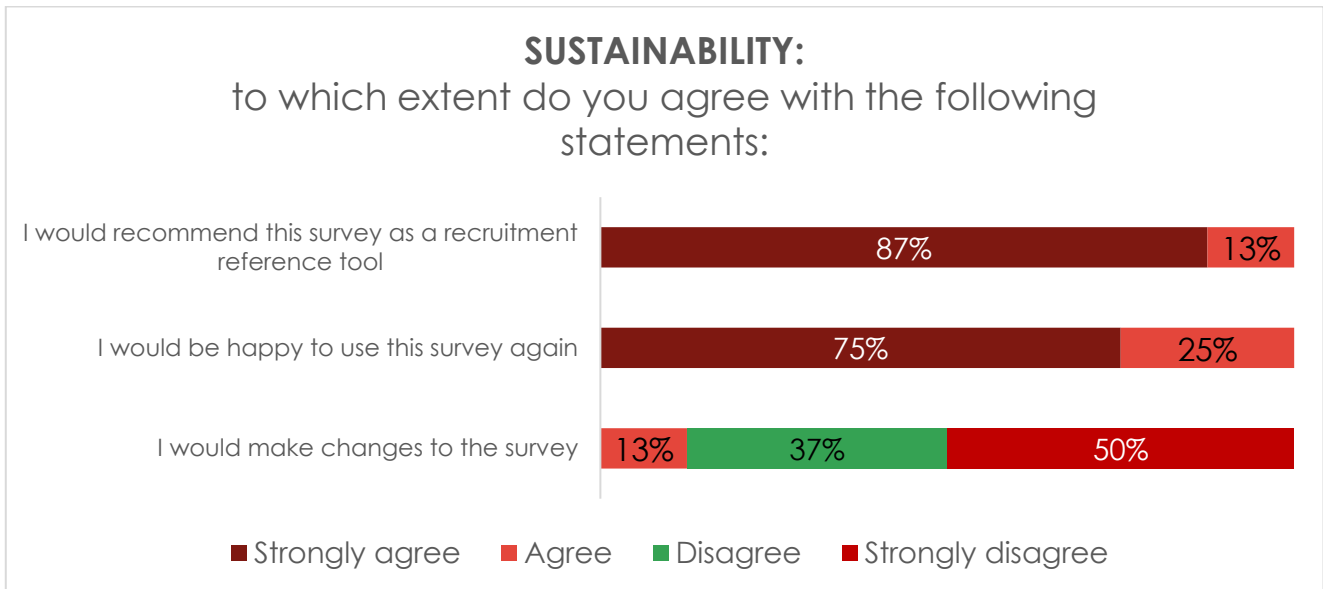
All respondents agreed that content of the 360 VBRT asked relevant and appropriate questions, with 63% strongly agreeing. Respondents found the 360 VBRT 'had appropriate and relevant questions' 'that could be easily adapted as needed, to fit with organisations, but are good as is'. All respondents disagreed there was essential information missing, no changes were proposed.

FIGURE 4: 360 VBRT PROCESS EVALUATION: PROCESS



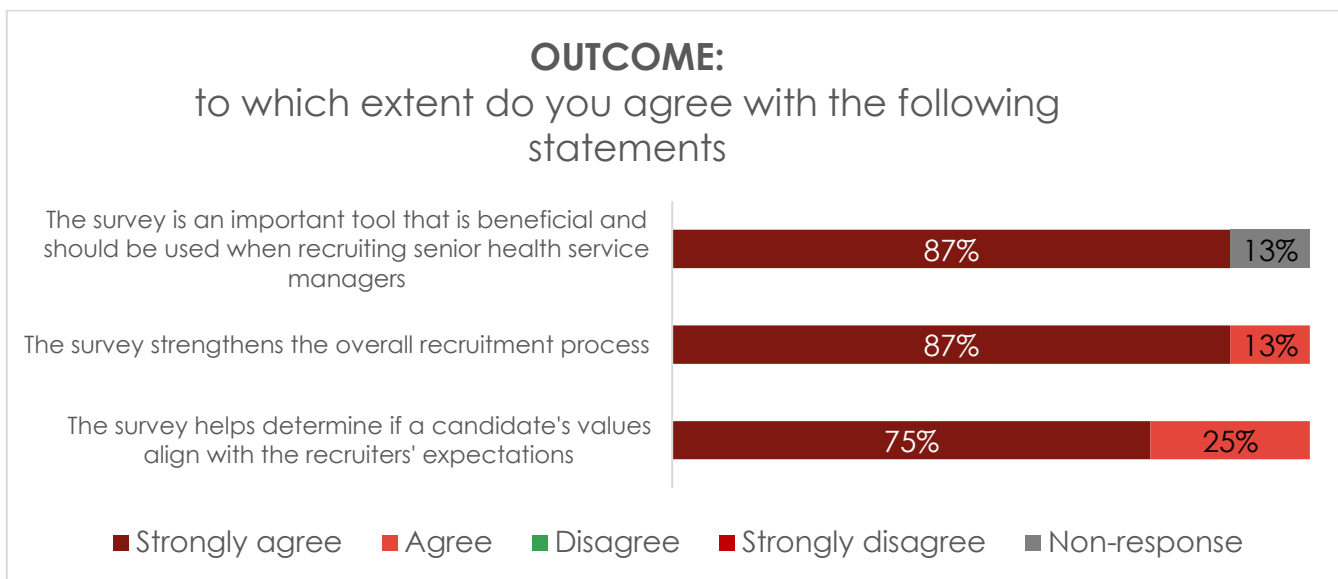
Most respondents described the 360 VBRT as 'easy to use and time efficient'. During PAR cycle three, a small number (n=3) of participants commented on the number of items in the survey and were concerned the tool might take too long to complete. Therefore, the number of items were consolidated and reduced. The process evaluation survey found that all respondents disagreed the tool took too long to complete, with 75% strongly disagreeing. On average, it took respondents 7.5 minutes to complete the 360 VBRT when one outlier was removed (they took just under 28 minutes). Overall, 100% of respondents agreed the 360 VBRT was easy to use.

FIGURE 5: 360 VBRT PROCESS EVALUATION: SUSTAINABILITY



Respondents strongly agreed they would recommend the 360 VBRT and be happy to use it again. 87% of respondents indicated they would not make any changes to the tool. However, one respondent commented that 'it was easy to complete the survey with an excellent candidate ... but some blind areas [should be] captured in the survey ... I had to write about them.' The 360 VBRT provides a combination of free text and Likert scales.

FIGURE 6: 360 VBRT PROCESS EVALUATION: OUTCOME



Respondents commented that the 360 VBRT will 'help identify the human area in addition to practical things' and is 'extremely helpful in aligning applicants with organisational values'. Most respondents (87%) strongly agreed the 360 VBRT strengthens a recruitment process, with 13% providing no response to this question. No respondents reported any issues with accessing the tool and no specific improvements were suggested.

The 360 VBRT process evaluation survey combined Likert scales and free text responses to measure participant agreement and analyse response patterns to reflect inter-rater consistency. Findings demonstrated strong and consistent agreement among participants, further validating the reliability and robustness of the 360 VBRT.

DISCUSSION

This study explored values of HSMs and how they could be identified during recruitment, which resulted in the development of a values-based reference tool. This study has shown that identifying values are key to understanding how HSMs make decisions, interact with others, and respond to challenges. Hence, identifying values will help predict future performance and assist in hiring decisions, as it is essential to employing the right person with values that align with their organisation. This is consistent with Herkes et al [14] who found that similar values between individuals and their workplace has the potential to positively impact organisational outcomes and improve care to health service consumers. Identifying values such as compassion are essential as they are key to quality healthcare, consumer satisfaction and improved clinical outcomes [15]; compassion also influences how challenges and complex situations [16] are navigated.

Based on results of the first two PAR cycles of this study, a 360 Degree Values-Based Reference Tool (360 VBRT) was developed. PAR cycle three enabled participants to interact with the tool during focus groups. This led to further improvements including combining some value statements to reduce repetition and simplify language. This cycle has demonstrated that the participants reflections could be applied in the fine-tuning phase of the cycle, allowing for continuous improvement of the 360 VBRT [17], demonstrating the strength of PAR in the development of the tool. PAR cycle four invited participants to trial the 360 VBRT. Results indicate it had appropriate and relevant questions, was easy to use and would be beneficial for recruitment. The findings suggested that the 360 VBRT could determine whether a candidate's values align with the organisational values, therefore demonstrating the potential for a strong addition to recruitment (18). This is in line with the view of Vincent [19] that 360 degree reference checks are vital to evaluate an applicant and that it is a necessary step to ensure the right candidate is employed. Moreover, reference checks have potential to serve as reliable and valid predictors of future job performance. With an appropriate tool, references can provide third-party insights into critical aspects of candidate values and behaviour [20].

Inclusion of self-assessment was important as it provides further opportunity to gain deeper insights into the applicant's values. Highly successful HSMs are often aware of their own values and how they align with their organisation's; their values are motivators for behaviour, whether conscious or not [21]. Another important function of the 360 VBRT, is that it provides an opportunity to identify whether the candidate exhibits behavioural consistency across interactions with individuals of varying roles and statuses. The 360 VBRT was developed with the view to obtain values-based insights, including how consistently the candidate upheld their values when interacting with others, regardless of position or status. This is important, as HSMs who treat people fairly and consistently, regardless of rank, tend to enhance staff engagement, improve job satisfaction, create psychological safety and promote shared meaning at work [22,23].

The 360 VBRT makes a point of difference compared to a traditional reference, as it seeks broad perspectives, integrates diverse viewpoints, and has a values focus. In addition, traditional references tend to be unreliable, biased or ineffective and are unsuitable for VBR [18]. Multiple perspectives strengthen the credibility of feedback and provide a more comprehensive and balanced method of reference checking. Given the risk of referee bias, the structured 360 VBRT offers an important mitigation strategy by directing referees to focus on and rank observable behaviours rather than provide general impressions, thereby enabling meaningful comparison across referee responses. Additionally, triangulating reference data with information from other stages of the recruitment process – such as interviews, applications and resumes – supports a more holistic assessment of the candidate. Intentionally comparing all references helps minimise reliance on any single, potentially bias referee. The study found that obtaining references from a variety of sources enables recruiters to consider diverse perspectives, identify behavioural consistency and make informed decisions about an applicant's values alignment with the organisation, beyond their skills and experience.

Multiple references from various sources – including peers, subordinates, and managers – are fundamental to evaluating whether candidate's values consistently align with the organisation. The tool uses simple language and is organised into three domains that identify personal, team and strategic values. Integrating a triad of 'value' domains supports recruiters to assess whether there is alignment between the individual and organisation [24,]. Findings suggest that collectively, the

triad of value domains offers a robust perspective of applicants, as personal, team and strategic values are identified and considered through insights from diverse professional perspectives.

VBR supports recruiting those whose values align with the organisation [25], the 360 VBRT strengthens this process. The findings indicate that personal and organisational values alignment supports a positive workplace culture with shared purpose, meaning and ways of working. Recruiting a value aligned workforce increases the likelihood of delivering better-quality services that are person-centred, compassionate and ethical. Additionally, people are more likely to stay with an organisation when their values are congruent with their workplace; this reduces turnover, creates stability, improves reputation, enhances trust and supports positive consumer outcomes [26]. The findings suggest that incorporating values into recruitment strengthens the selection process and improves the likelihood of appointing an individual who is capable and whose values align with their organisation.

STRENGTHS OF THIS RESEARCH

Having the same participant cohort over the entire project facilitated sustained collaboration and enhanced co-design of the 360 VBRT. This process was inclusive of diverse opinions and represented the participants collective wisdom. Participants were HSMs involved in recruitment, came from diverse professional backgrounds and health settings across major regions of Tasmania, Australia. There was strong emphasis on the participant voice whilst also maintaining anonymity given people are easily identified in a small community.

The 360 VBRT is a strong addition to VBR and supports the recruitment of HSMs whose values align with their organisation. This is important as a value-aligned workforce can foster a positive culture, enhance engagement, performance and retention which all contributes to improved quality of care and consumer outcomes.

This study contributes to the literature on VBR which emerged after the Francis Report [1]. It appears that there are fewer studies on VBR since 2019, yet recruiting the right people with the right skills and values remains important, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Furthermore, the co-designed 360 VBRT offers a focused and meaningful method for identifying the values of candidates which enables a deeper understanding of the applicant beyond their skills and knowledge.

LIMITATIONS

Study limitations include the narrow scope of participants in terms of location, role and sample size. A greater diversity of participants may provide a broader understanding of the topic being studied. Due to unavoidable events, the time over which the research was undertaken extended. 18 participants in total collectively participated in the study, 55% were unable to participate in all four cycles.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The 360 VBRT is ready to trial in a recruitment campaign and therefore further research could explore efficacy of the tool, performance, retention and other outcomes of those employed using the 360 VBRT as part of their recruitment process. In this study, the participant cohort was limited to senior managers in Tasmania, Australia. Future research could expand the scope by engaging alternative cohorts – such as consumers, frontline clinicians, clinical managers and HSMs from other states or countries – to explore how the 360 VBRT functions across diverse professional, organisational and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the 360 VBRT could be trialled beyond the healthcare sector.

To express an interest in accessing the tool, please contact the corresponding author.

CONCLUSIONS

PAR cycles three and four of this study led to finalising the 360 VBRT. This tool enables recruiters to identify a candidate's values from the insights of diverse professionals (subordinate, peer, and manager). Diverse perspectives support better hiring decisions, as identifying values provide deeper insights beyond just exploring skills and experience. Employees whose

values align with their organisation's values are more likely to be motivated, authentic, contribute to enhanced service performance, and deliver high-quality care that enhances consumer outcomes. The inclusion of the 360 VBRT enhances recruitment by increasing the likelihood of recruiting a HSM who has values congruent with their organisation. Fundamentally, having the right values-aligned HSM can foster a positive workplace culture where staff feel valued, supported and motivated, which ultimately leads to improved outcomes for consumers and the organisation. The 360 VBRT offers a structured and rigorous method of exploring values to inform decision-making during recruitment and is a strong addition to VBR.

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