

# Equally Robust

## Virtual vs. in-person simulation assessments



**Social distancing drives a greater need for virtual work, including in the area of assessments. In this report, the Korn Ferry Institute summarizes research and case studies that highlight the robustness of executing leadership simulations virtually.**

Until the advent of technology that enabled remote simulations, Korn Ferry administered in-person leadership simulation assessments comprised of interviews, tests, and a variety of live interactive business simulations. We have done so with outstanding client outcomes. However, the in-person assessments can be time consuming in terms of the travel required, particularly for global organizations wishing to assess employees from all over the world.

Korn Ferry has administered virtual assessment increasingly in recent years, wherein at least some components of the assessment, such as an interview or a simulation, are administered via two-way video or telephone connection. This provides clients and participants increased flexibility, along with decreased travel costs (and time away from work), thus serving as a great alternative to face-to-face assessments. But it is important to ensure that assessment scores and candidate reactions are not influenced adversely as a result of a different mode of assessment.

To that end, Korn Ferry has examined the effect of virtual versus in-person assessment modes on assessment results and participant satisfaction on a sample of 1,115 employees from a large global communications company, finding evidence favoring the use of virtual assessments. The sample included 168 face-to-face participants and 947 virtual participants. Assessment mode differed only in the direct report meeting and interview, which were virtual. A composite of these two scores served as the outcome variable of interest. Several of the assessment components were completed in a consistent fashion via computer, regardless of the participant's face-to-face versus virtual simulation status, including personality and derailing trait measures, an in-basket exercise, and a participant background questionnaire. These component scores served as controls. Hierarchical regression results showed that virtual assessments are comparable to face-to-face assessments (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Remote vs. in-person mode variance. Dependent variable: Behavioral interview—Direct report meeting composite.

Predictor	Multiple R	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	F	df <sub>1</sub>	df <sub>2</sub>	Sig. F change
Personality, Derailer traits	0.158	.025	.025	9.26	3	1,087	.000
Education, Management level	0.159	.025	.000	0.12	2	1,085	.884
In-basket score	0.294	.086	.061	72.65	1	1,084	.000
Remote vs. In-person mode	0.299	.090	.003	3.88	1	1,083	.049

The largest single predictor of interview and direct report meeting scores was a competency simulation with a consistent mode of implementation (computer), the in-basket. After considering individual differences in other performance-relevant characteristics (personality, derailer traits, education, management level) that were measured consistently via computer, virtually none of the variation in the interactive simulation scores was related to the mode of assessment (~ 0.3% of the variance). This means assessing participants virtually or face-to-face will result in comparable scores.

Two case studies show how the virtual simulation assessments can deliver comparable participant experience, predictive power, and developmental value for individuals and their organizations.

### Case study 1: Validation of virtual assessments

A large, Fortune 200 life sciences company uses simulation assessments to predict performance and leadership impact. Korn Ferry assessed close to 500 senior leaders in the company to determine their readiness for promotion. Over 98% of these simulation assessments have been delivered virtually. The remaining assessments used a blended approach of virtual (pre-work, interviews, and debriefs) and in-person (simulation exercises and feedback). Manager performance ratings were collected an average of roughly 18 months following assessment completion. When compared with long-term performance, leadership, and company expectations, simulation assessments were found to be valuable and predictive, underscoring the power of virtual assessment.

Assessment scores predicted performance and leadership readiness, even distinguishing

among a narrow range of highly talented people. Simulation assessments in combination with a test and interview, substantially predicted performance ( $r = .34$ ) and were more highly correlated with performance than self-report tests and interviews alone.

Leaders who were “strongly recommended” for promotion were 4 times as likely to be rated as top 10% by managers ( $r=.26$ ) than leaders who were “not recommended.” And leaders who were “not recommended” are 8 times as likely to be rated as bottom 10% ( $r=.37$ ) than those leaders who were “strongly recommended.” Results for each finding were statistically significant.

Additionally, both participants and managers see value in the simulation assessment experience. For managers, 94% saw the value for the participant’s development and 88% said they found the assessment insightful. Among participants, 92% found the assessment engaging and 89% said it provided useful strategies for development priorities.

### Case study 2: Moving to high-touch virtual simulations in response to COVID-19

A company seeking to assess potential CEO successor candidates decided to move forward with a virtual assessment after the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented an in-person experience. Given the intensive, high-touch nature of the CEO readiness assessment involving six assessors, multiple assessments and interviews, and regular feedback and coaching, in-person arrangements have been preferred. However, the benefits of virtual delivery, given the travel constraints from the novel coronavirus outbreak, far outweigh any drawbacks.

The executive expressed appreciation for the ability to participate virtually, which required less time away from work and home, reduced travel costs, increased scheduling flexibility, and reduced risk of COVID-19 exposure. Additionally, the organization was able to demonstrate continued commitment to people and their development, as well as the health of their talent pipeline and CEO successors.

Assessors found that by making careful preparations—from ensuring technology access to sending pre-work and communications in a well-timed manner—the participant’s “high touch” experience did not have to feel compromised. Through numerous check-ins, assessors were able to provide opportunities for meaningful reflection and feedback on the individual’s strengths and development opportunities, while also staying close to the participant experience along the way.

## Conclusion

Given the unpredictable nature of the new reality of this pandemic, it is important to reaffirm that simulation assessments delivered virtually are both as valid and as valuable as those delivered in-person. Korn Ferry promotes virtual delivery best practices including flexibility with scheduling, well-timed communication, real time coaching, asynchronous pre-work, and technology support. Even better, participants can dive into the challenging business simulation and for a moment, put the pandemic out of their minds.

## References

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### About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with organizations to design their organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their workforce. And, we help professionals navigate and advance their careers.

### About the Korn Ferry Institute

The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books, and a quarterly magazine, *Briefings*, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth, and success.