

Holistic assessment

Holistic assessment (also called 'integrated assessment') focuses on the assessment of whole work activities rather than specific elements. When assessing a unit of competence holistically, the assessment activities integrate a number of aspects of the competency. Holistic assessment, underpinned by professional judgement, can reduce the time for assessment, and can promote greater equity in the assessment process. It is also useful for identifying valuable applicants who may be overlooked in more conventional assessment processes.

To conduct a holistic assessment the assessor develops an image or picture of how a competent worker would perform the activity. The assessor then identifies the types of evidence needed to show competence and the techniques that would be used to gather that evidence. The evidence is then reviewed and a decision made about applicant's competence.

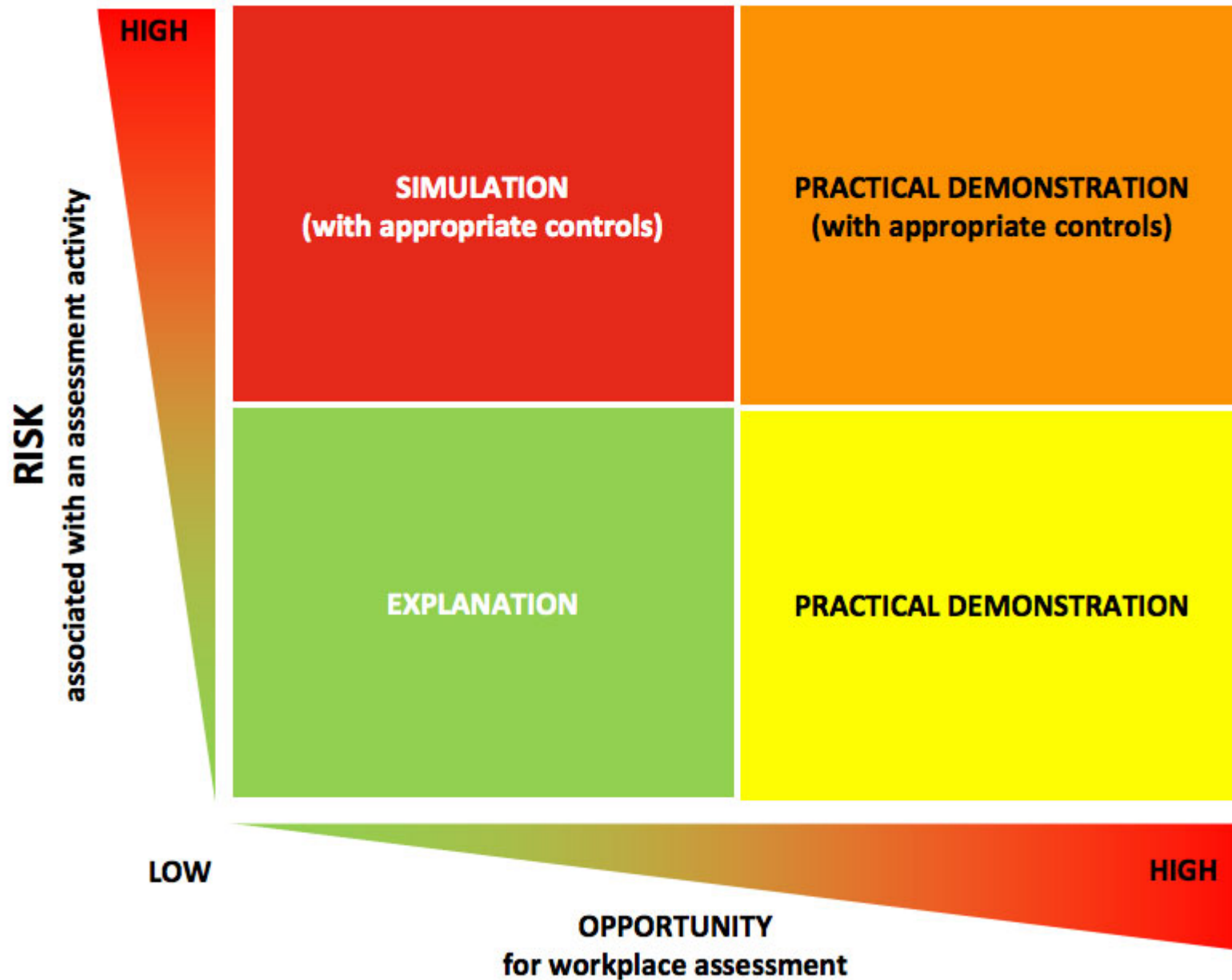
The benefits of holistic assessments are that they:

- reflect the real world and skill requirements of industry
- save time and reduce costs
- streamline processes and optimise evidence opportunities

Assessment approaches for the rail industry

Given the safety focus of the rail industry, assessors need to feel confident that their assessment strategies are robust, regardless of whether competencies are assessed through training pathways or through Skills Recognition. So how does the assessor decide which assessment methods are the most appropriate, especially for competencies that impact on safety?

The following matrix factors in two variables—risk associated with a workplace activity and opportunity to assess the activity in the workplace—to provide some guidance for assessors in selecting appropriate assessment strategies:



This matrix has been adapted from Baker, J. & Durrant, P. (2008) Developing and maintaining competence: Experiences from the rail industry. Een keurmerk van Hobéon

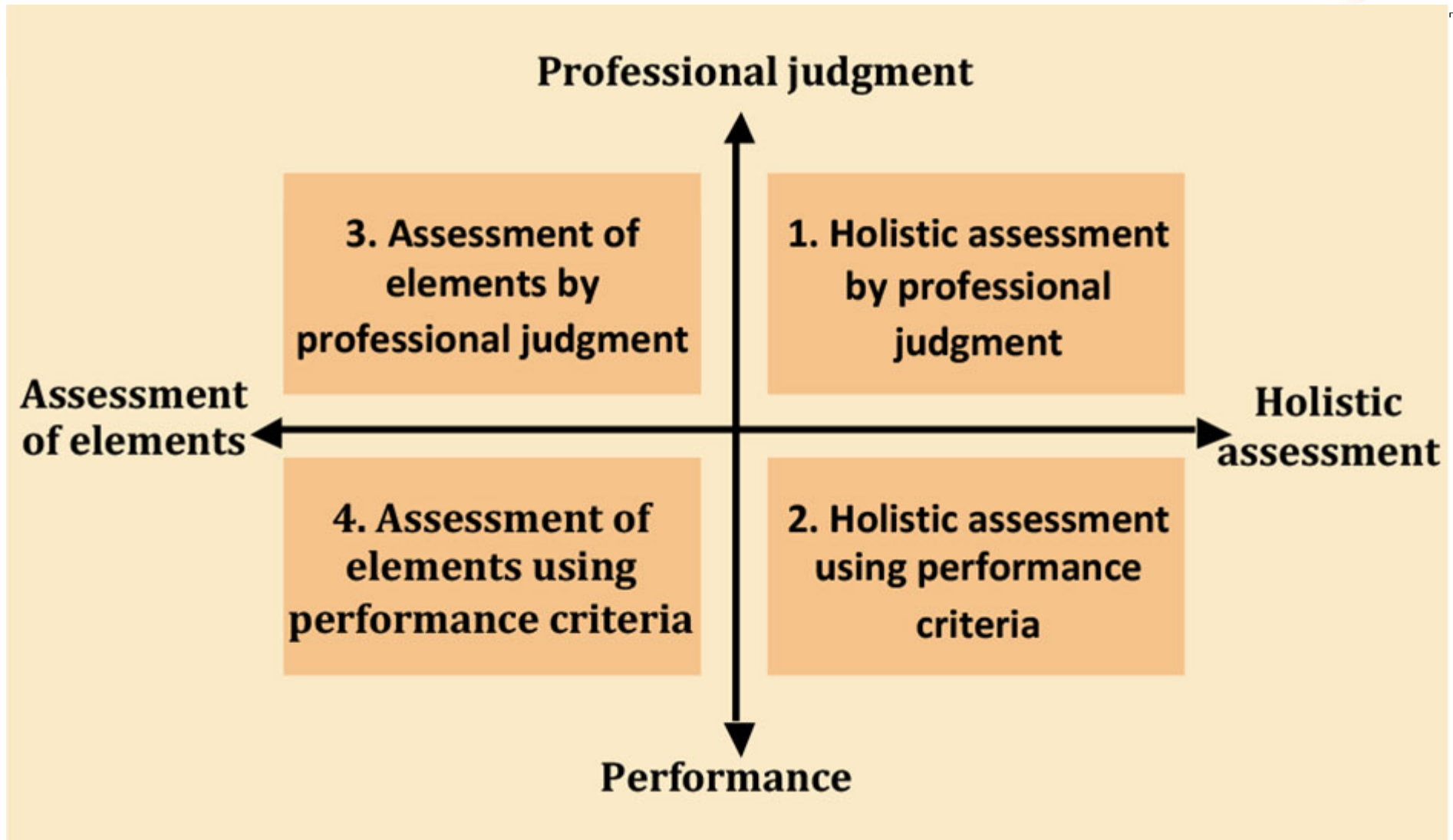
As this matrix indicates:

- *low risk, low frequency* activities may be adequately assessed via oral techniques (competency conversation, narratives, questioning).
- *low risk, high frequency* activities may be adequately assessed by workplace demonstration / observation.
- *high risk, high frequency* activities are ideally assessed by workplace demonstration / observation, provided the risks are controlled.
- *high risk, low frequency* activities may be assessed by simulation in order to control the risk, as the opportunity to assess under real work conditions is unlikely to arise.

An alternative approach

Another way of deciding about assessment strategies is suggested by Larry Smith (2005). Smith notes that there are two dimensions to RPL assessment decisions:

- The *mode of decision making* ranges from Professional Judgement at one end of the continuum, to Performance Criteria at the other end.
- The *focus of assessment* ranges from Assessment of Elements at one end, to Holistic Assessment at the other end of the continuum.



This has been adapted from Smith, L. (2005) A two-dimensional conceptualisation for the assessment of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), a paper presented at What a difference a pedagogy makes: Researching lifelong learning and teaching, 24-26 June 2005 Stirling, Scotland.

Smith notes that, ideally, assessors should be aiming for an assessment process that emphasises quadrant (1) holistic assessment by professional judgment.

For those roles in the rail industry that are not safety-critical, assessments conducted in quadrant (1) are likely to pose no significant safety risk. However, safety-critical roles may be more appropriately assessed in quadrant (4).

It should be stated, however, that professional judgment will always play a role in assessing abstract skills (such as decision making and situational awareness), which are particularly important for safety-critical activities in the rail industries. So a more comprehensive assessment for safety-critical roles performed by Rail Safety Workers may emphasise assessment of elements using *both* performance criteria and professional judgment.

It may be advisable for assessors to discuss their proposed assessment strategies with relevant representatives from rail organisations in order to ensure that industry standards and safety obligations are never compromised.