



mind probe

- Using Assessments to Screen Candidates
- is a Rigorous Process,
- Sometimes Resulting in Nothing More
- than Smoke and Mirrors

by Natalie D. Brecher, CPM®

Hiring the right employees

is the ultimate return on investment for managers. By placing quality hires in appropriate positions, a company can maximize its productivity and effectiveness. It also allows new employees to immediately contribute without greatly disrupting existing staff.

But predicting which candidate is best for employment isn't always easy. Any help available to pass over poor performers and hire high performers is valued. That's why assessments are appealing: They promise to objectively and accurately indicate if an applicant holds the knowledge, skills, abilities and characteristics needed for a position.

Employers want an easy, quick, yet reliable method for hiring, and assessments promise to do just that. Personality and psychological assessments in particular have earned the attention of employers as pre-employment screening tools to help choose people most likely to perform well in a position. The tests, however, come with their flaws.

● BRAIN TEASERS

Employers often use personality and psychological assessments as employment screening mechanisms to gauge which candidates will best fit their company cultures and thrive in their available positions.

While there is a wide array of assessment tests to use, some of the most popular ones employers use include the DISC Behavioral Model, which analyzes the behavior of individuals (particularly their dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientious-

ness) in specific situations; and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a clinical examination used to diagnose mental disorders but commonly taken by those applying for high-risk jobs such as law enforcement.

Promises of accurate, valid results by testing companies are supposed to translate into a shorter application process because of a narrowed candidate pool, better hiring selections and lower turnover costs due to proper employee placement.

Sue Borowski, SPHR, editor of human resources material for J.J. Keller and Associates Inc., in Neenah, Wisc., believes personality and psychological tests are an additional tool for hiring managers to ensure they are hiring the best candidate. She said the tests adequately supplement the interview process.

"Some people are very practiced at answering interview questions," she said. "If a person interviews well, it can be misleading. It's not always the best test. It's a test of how well someone interviews—not how well a person will do in a job. It's hard to fake your answers in personality or psychological tests."

Borowski added that this doesn't mean that interviews aren't effective, but they are only one factor in your determination of whether someone is a right fit.

Likewise, hiring managers should not place too much weight on personality and psychological assessment results, said Mitchell Rosenberg, Ph.D, a human resources and organizational development professional with M.M. Rosenberg and Associates, a consulting firm to Fortune 500 companies in Laguna Beach, Calif. However, he did say the more information gathered about a candidate, the better.

"There is often a fine line in the selection process between mediocrity and excellence in terms of performance," Rosenberg said. "During the interview, people put their best foot forward and say what they think you want to hear. Anything you can do to provide more data will help."

● ANALYZE THIS

Despite the increased data such assessments might provide on a candidate, Rosenberg said he does not recommend or support personality or psychological tests for pre-employment screening. He said the value is disproportionate to the weight some hiring managers place on them.

"Although it is helpful to have a more comprehensive understanding of each candidate's personality, a greater indicator of performance is the success or failure the candidate had in their last two positions," Rosenberg said. "The best rule of thumb is: The best predictor of future performance or behavior is past behavior."

One concern with psychological and personality assessments is that their interpretation is subjective, and only trained professionals should analyze the results. Businesses have their core competencies and should concentrate their resources in people, time and dollars on those. Real estate managers are not psychologists and should not try to be.

"These tools are valuable when the people using them have the training and expertise to use them correctly," Rosenberg said. "The time required for many firms to have a staff person obtain a certain level of proficiency may not be worth it."

Another concern with such tests is the possibility they can be manipulated. Candidates with insight could manipulate their answers to achieve any profile of scores they want. Only honest answers will result in honest results.

"These tests may also produce inaccuracies in competitive job markets as individuals may attempt to 'cheat' the tests—providing answers based on what they believe the employer wants to hear," said Craig D. McMahon, partner of Kimball, Tirey & St. John, LLP in San Diego.

Reliability could be another shortfall of personality and psychological assessments. Reliability means consistent results. For example, it's been reported that 47 percent to more than 50 percent of test-takers change types when they retake the Myers-Briggs assessment. And regardless of the tests' reliability in determining one's personality, employers want a reliable indicator of how well a candidate will perform in a job.

"The problem gets to be when the results are used definitively as a label," Rosenberg said. "All results are really degrees, but people tend to go to absolutes. For example, you may score higher in introvert, but that doesn't mean you don't have extrovert characteristics too. It's on a scale of degrees."

● LEGAL PITFALLS

Aside from concerns about these assessments' accuracy and reliability, legal concerns exist too. Personality and psychological tests risk invasion of privacy, disclosure of protected elements such as religious beliefs or sexual

practices, and many expose conditions covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

As with all employee assessments, administering a personality/psychological analysis must comply with laws. After an offer of employment has been extended to an applicant but before duties have started, the employer may require a psychological evaluation or make inquiry into mental state only if it is job related and consistent with business necessity and all applicants are subject to the same evaluation. Employers must have a legitimate reason to do so.

According to McMahon, if an employer chooses to implement any of these tests as a pre-employment condition, they must be clearly distinguished from medical examinations, which may not be required of job applicants. "Further," he said, "Employers must be careful to not discriminate on the basis of genetic characteristics. Since personality is tied to genetics, employers must ensure that any test or its results is substantially related to job function."

Used incorrectly to screen candidates, these assessments are guaranteed to cause problems. Laws that apply to assessments are often difficult to interpret. Testing can violate antidiscrimination laws if it's used against protected classes, or if it excludes people in protected classes, unless the employer can justify the test or procedure under law.

McMahon added, "Whether an employer chooses to implement tests that evaluate physical skills or tests that evaluate technical or professional skills, an employer must be careful that the tests do not disproportionately disqualify any protected



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class of people. If a testing method is found to have a disparate impact, the employer must be able to demonstrate the procedure is specifically job-related and consistent with business necessities.”

To determine if a test complies with applicable laws, consult an attorney and refer to the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission’s (EEOC’s) Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures. The guidelines provide a framework for determining the proper use of tests and other selection procedures.

Equal and consistent application of screening tests is as important as the tests themselves. The screening process must be evenly applied to all candidates for the position. It’s acceptable to have different processes for different positions, just apply them to all candidates. Determine your policy, confirm it with counsel, put it in writing and adhere to it equally.

● BEFORE AND AFTER

Employers desiring to use personality or psychological assessments should verify the assessment they elect to use is valid. They should verify the test developer has used recognized standards to write and validate it, and has documented the process as well. Be aware, however, that test developers are not required to support their validity studies or defend their assessment, should your use of it come into question.

Rosenberg also said a professional

expert should administer the test and assess the results and the hiring manager should carefully put the appropriate weight on the data received from the test for the hiring decision.

Ultimately, though, the experts interviewed for this article said personality and psychological tests are best used *after* a candidate has been hired for purposes of teambuilding and improving communication.

“When you have your team in place, then (these tests) can be used to give insight into each other’s behaviors which can result in higher performance of the team,” Rosenberg said.

And just as Rosenberg discouraged the use of tests to screen out job candidates, he said the tests should not be used to label or inhibit employees.

“Don’t make test results be an end-all to decision making,” Rosenberg said. “Don’t say, ‘I’m not going to invite you on this task force because you’re a ‘green’ and ‘greens’ tend to overanalyze things.”

When you omit or include someone based on personality test results, you are limiting the chance of an employee performing well, the opportunity to develop a strong employee and the company’s chances of success.

For these assessments to be of the greatest value, concurrent validity (providing a direct correlation of essential job-related criteria to the assessments being used) should be determined, continuously monitored and adjusted as needed. Find what the position needs to be a high-performer in the essential job functions and then test for those exact conditions.

Only use personality tests that have an explicit relationship to the job essentials, as determined by a current job analysis; are equally and consistently applied; and are interpreted by a qualified individual. Use a trained professional to guide the organization on how to use the test results and always consult with an attorney. Stay objective and look for information garnered from a formal, structured and equally applied interview to mesh with the information obtained from any testing you do. If not, it’s just a parlor game. ■



For the full white paper report on employment assessments, write Natalie D. Brecher, CPM® (nbrecher@brecherassociates.com), a seasoned authority who helps organizations enhance workforce performance and managers develop and improve leadership skills. She provides consulting, coaching, training and keynotes to fortify positive, lasting change.

test subjects

A variety of pre-employment screening tests exist for employers to evaluate the best candidates for a position. The tests come with risks and rewards, though, along with legal implications. In all cases, the candidate's permission should be obtained—in writing—to perform any and all screenings, tests and assessments, and even checks into their history online and through social networks. Because laws change frequently, have your documentation reviewed by your legal counsel annually as part of your risk management plan.

1 INTELLIGENCE AND TECHNICAL TESTS

Definition: Knowledge and skill tests

Why perform such a test: They appear to be the easiest to correlate to essential job functions and apply without bias when used wisely.

Drawbacks: Must verify they accurately test attributes that relate directly to job essentials and, as Craig D. McMahon, partner of Kimball, Tiley & St. John, LLP reported, "...provide a reasonable measure of job performance, evaluating the person for the job, not the person in the abstract."

Mitchell Rosenberg, Ph.D, cited another consideration, "Most skills are 'trainable' and usually do not distinguish the average candidate from the exceptional performer."

2 REFERENCE TESTS

Definition: Contacting former employers; confirming said education, designations, and licensing directly; checking with contacts on social networks such as *LinkedIn* regarding an individual; and performing Web searches to see if and how a particular individual is reflected.

Why perform such a test: References can confirm a candidate's ability to perform, as well as whether a candidate is being truthful about their experience and credentials.

Drawbacks: Not all previous employers will be open about the candidate and his or her performance. Additionally, Web-based information isn't always accurate.

3 CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS AND HONESTY TESTS

Definition: Public and criminal records searches to determine if a person has been convicted of a crime; and assessments to identify job candidates who are untruthful about their pasts

Why perform such a test: Criminal background checks

increase in importance when there is access to high-risk items such as money or other assets, and confidential business or tenant records. Conducting a criminal background check is relatively easy and inexpensive.

Drawbacks: Laws vary widely from state to state regarding the administration of criminal background checks. Concerns regarding accuracy stem from the lack of a centralized database that maintains records of conviction. McMahon cautioned, "Convictions should not be an absolute bar to employment. Rather, the employer should carefully evaluate the severity of the crime in relation to current work demands as well as passage of time since the conviction."

Honesty tests are rarely reliable and may violate anti-discrimination laws and violations of privacy.

4 CREDIT CHECKS

Definition: Running a candidate's credit report to indicate if delinquent payments exist, bankruptcies have been filed, or any judgments have been assessed.

Why perform such a test: If a position will be handling money or other assets, have authorization for spending or access to customers' property, you may want to ensure the person has financial maturity, responsibility, and is not in economic straits.

Drawbacks: The Fair Credit Reporting Act requires a candidate's written consent to check her or his credit. Should the person be turned down because of the credit check's results, the act requires you provide the candidate a copy of the report, the source of the report, and inform the person of the right to dispute the report.

5 PHYSICAL TESTS

Definition: Inquiries into an applicant's physical ability to perform job-related functions—and is not a medical examination.

Why perform such a test: Physical tests can ensure a candidate can perform any physical functions related to a position.

Drawbacks: Physical assessments are an area where discriminatory practices can abound. McMahon advised, "Ensure they do not disproportionately disqualify applicants based upon their protected class characteristics and require such tests only if all applicants are required to do so." Use insured, third parties to determine how the testing is administered and evaluated to add legal protection.