

PERSONALITY TESTING IN THE WORKPLACE: WHAT CAN AN EMPLOYER EXPECT?

(Excerpted from an article by Kathleen Groll Connolly in Business & Legal Reports, January 2003)

If they are mathematically sound, legally defensible, and predictive of a person's job performance—is it any surprise that personality tests are more and more a part of hiring and promotion? No one knows for sure how many employers use tests, but the number is growing, according to professionals in the field of psychological testing.

Pre-employment tests can cover several areas. Basic intelligence tests, skills tests, and multifaceted observations are all part of the suite. This article specifically discusses personality tests. These explore a person's basic motivations, attitudes, and temperament.

Wendy Alfus-Rothman, Organizational Psychologist and President of The Wenroth Group in New York City, uses testing extensively for development as well as for selection. "Personality and behavioral testing was once considered a selection tool primarily for retail positions where shrinkage is a chronic problem. But in today's market, human resource professionals receive hundreds of resumes for every open position (and for many that are not open). After screening for qualifications, testing gives overworked HR teams another tool to assist them in intelligent hiring.

Testing is now embraced as part of a multifaceted hiring process at the management and executive ranks as well as in administrative, research, sales, and creative jobs. It is used to identify high potential players – not to keep them *out* of the promotion pool, but to target development activities that can move them *into* that pool. Even attorneys in law firms have seen the value for professional hires. And it makes sense.

"It is a company's managers and executives that set the tone of an organization. A mishire or a mis-promotion at this level has ramifications both broad and deep. Skill is easy enough to interview for. Evaluating "fit" – the most important ingredient for success – is where these tests really demonstrate their value. And they work up and down the corporate level, for employees at every level."

If personality tests are in your hiring future, what can you reasonably expect? What shouldn't you expect?

Select the Right Test

First, plan on learning something about testing. Tests are not all alike and there are many to choose from.

"The biggest misinformation we experience in the marketplace," says Robert Hogan, Ph.D., a well-known test designer and psychometrician, "is that a test is a test is a test. There is very poor awareness of the differences in quality among tests." Hogan is the author, together

with his wife, Joyce Hogan, Ph.D., of four workplace personality tests. They run Hogan Assessment Systems in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Is the test reliable and valid?

A quick look at the history of psychological testing provides a clue to the confusion. The only tests that you should consider for a hiring program are those that are mathematically reliable and valid. This is a rigorous process that can take a test designer a number of years and hundreds or thousands of measurements.

Yet this field is relatively unregulated, although it is also highly litigated. There are new tests coming into the market all the time. They may or may not have the research data that you should require. It is a case of “buyer beware.” Don’t be shy about requiring evidence of the research. A reputable testing company will have no problem producing it.

What is the test designed to measure?

A second issue is that some tests are sold for the workplace but were designed for another purpose. Some of the oldest, best-known, and best-researched tests were developed to detect pathology in the general population. While they might be excellent predictors of tendencies towards violence or dishonesty, they are generally not predictors of a person’s “bright side”—the collection of visible personality characteristics that make normal people different from one another. The bright side also has to do with the ways in which personality predisposes a candidate to be a contributor.

Does the test have adverse impact?

Also, some personality tests have been designed with questions about a person’s religious beliefs and sexual practices, which run the risk of being viewed as discriminatory. You must be able to show that your use of testing is fair and does not adversely impact a protected group, in case an unhappy applicant challenges you. The surest method for meeting this requirement is a formal job analysis.

So, three questions you should ask before a test comes under serious consideration for hiring purposes are these:

1. Is it mathematically reliable and valid?
2. Was it designed specifically for use in the workplace?
3. Has it been fully tested by the test designer for possible adverse impact? In other words, does the test give the same results independent of one’s race, gender, ethnicity, or other background factor?

Make Tests Part of a Process

Tests are not a stand-alone event. The consensus of those we consulted is that tests have much potential for increasing the quality of hiring, assuming you make testing part of a well-designed and well-managed hiring process. And while you're designing the hiring process, you'd best install a measurement system for your company's employment experience as well.

Rothman says that the first step in a good multifaceted selection and/or promotion process is to get extremely clear about the requirement of the job in behavioral terms. "It is equally important to be clear about the culture of the organization. Few people can do this objectively. Tests make these variables concrete, and produce a profile of success for a particular job in a particular company."

Armed with the profile, candidates first are reviewed for functional skills. The remaining candidates are asked to take an online personality test and their results are compared to the profile.

Next, candidates with high fit undergo behavioral interviews based on the test results. Two-member teams often conduct the interviews. One team member is always a highly experienced HR professional. "That is the tipping factor," says Rothman. "There is no substitute for that."

Measure the Results

Employers have to keep records of company employment experience—preferably before and after tests are introduced.

Assuming the test is well selected and correctly used, employers will be able to prove the value of testing to themselves. "If they (employers) keep records before and after they begin testing, they'll see a decrease in negative business indicators—turnover, accidents, insubordination, —and an increase in positive business indicators—retention, productivity, etc.," says Bob Hogan.

Interviews and Resumes Still Matter

Can testing produce a clear thumbs-up/thumbs-down indicator? Absolutely not, says Rothman. Tests are one dimensional, and people are at *least* two dimensional. It is the combination of high tech with high touch that provides a competitive edge. Tests can give you a good indicator of likely behaviors that can be compared to behaviors necessary for success in a particular job. It is then up to you to direct your interview to explore those behaviors. It is the total candidate package that counts: the interview, resume, test, follow-up behaviors, references.

Whether for development, selection, or promotion, tests can increase your chances for flawless selection.

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