

PSYCHOMETRIC TESTING FOR RECRUITMENT – YES OR NO?

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Occupational testing by employers is becoming more commonplace in the selection of personnel and for development and management purposes. From an employee's perspective the results of the tests assist with the establishment of firm foundations for career choice. Tests normally consist of a standardised set of questions or tasks, which are used to measure the comparative skills, knowledge, abilities and other characteristics of individuals in an employment context.

There are appropriate tests for all types and levels of job selection, from the unskilled factory worker to senior management positions. Most of the usage has been in larger organisations, not only because they select staff more often, but also because tests can provide a comparative, standardised assessment between candidates where multiple unit recruitment exists.

While there may be a requirement for functional testing focussed on workplace applications, the most common occupational testing is psychometric: standardised behaviour sampling which can be described by a category or numeric scale. The three most common psychometric tests are ability, personality and personal interest tests.

Ability	Ability tests, often called cognitive (or intelligence) tests, measure the ability to think critically and comprehend information. There are also specific tests for analytical, verbal and numeric reasoning, as well as a range of other tests for such things as motor, spatial and physical abilities.
Personality	This is probably the most frequently used method of assessing personality other than subjective judgements made, during the interview. These tests can measure a wide range of attributes, including interpersonal relationship preferences, sales and leadership ability, thinking style, energy and emotions.
Personal Interest	These have more relevance in career counselling where they might assist measuring values, life and work experiences to establish career direction or preference.

Test Validity and Reliability

To have validity a test must measure what it claims to measure. The content of the test should be relevant to the role and represent a sampling of the abilities

and skills required in the context of the job situation. Ideally tests should be validated for each situation. However this is not normally feasible because of the wide range of job roles, and because it is not often cost effective to have customised tests for each organisational task.

The extent to which test results are an indicator of future performance has been the subject of debate for many years. The providers of testing material hold the opinion that testing is a far greater predictor of job success than interviews, and their research supports this.

There is little doubt that cognitive testing has the highest degree of validity, and has been shown to be consistently good at predicting job success for a very wide range of jobs, particularly for those requiring substantial analysis, problem solving and decision making. Measured against databases of current industry or company norms, ability tests do provide an accurate measure of absolute and relative ability.

Research on personality tests shows they have more validity when a job analysis has been completed, and the focus of the test is on the particular traits which are critical to the role, rather than on more general personality characteristics.

There has been a proliferation of personality tests over the past ten years, and in many situations their value is diminished because of the inadequate training of testers and assessors, and the lack of test relevance to the job under consideration. There are also concerns that candidates can skew test results by choosing responses that put them in a favourable light and thus fake the results. This can render tests meaningless despite most having a scale to measure “faking”. The reality is that the incidence of this behaviour is low with negligible impact on test validity. A number of strategies, including making the applicant aware that reference checking and interview probing will be used to confirm the honesty of test responses, reduces the will to deceive.

Feedback

If testing is used it is very important that the appropriate feedback is given to participants who have committed considerable time and have subjected themselves to investigation of their competencies, skill and personal traits. There is some risk that participants may challenge the results, particularly where the purpose for which the tests were undertaken involves a selection decision. It is important that all feedback is given by a properly qualified and experienced person who has a full understanding of the test results, and has been trained in test interpretation and the necessary counselling skills to make the feedback session a constructive experience.

Why Test?

It is important to understand that testing on its own should never be the sole tool in selection decisions. There is any amount of research material and validation studies that provide information on the predictive validity of various means of selecting staff. Recent findings provide quite an optimistic picture of the value of the interview and rigorous reference checking as a highly valid method of selection.

Our experience has been that the combination of interviewing, psychometric testing and reference checking provides the more watertight and fairer methodology. Ability tests, which have the highest validity, should be used where thinking capacity and specific numeric or reasoning skill levels are required. Care should be taken to ensure the tests are relevant and fair and do not exclude or disadvantage particular groups of people who, for example, lack language skills. Consideration should also be given to people who perhaps struggle in a test environment.

Our recommendation is to undertake personality tests prior to a structured interview. This gives the candidate and the interviewer the opportunity to discuss the behavioural traits identified by testing in the context of the role being considered. This provides a fairer method of evaluating candidate potential and helps eliminate subjectivity and the potential for interviewer bias.

Overall we give psychometric testing a solid “yes” and use the available tools on a daily basis as an important part of our decision making.