

CLOSEUP

RECRUITMENT & STAFFING

PSYCHOMETRIC TESTING

When it comes to assessing the skill of candidates, HR has the basics down pat. But measuring the unknowns — things like how the worker will fit within the company's culture and get along with co-workers — has always been a grey area. Psychometric testing, in theory, can help quantify the unknowns to help organizations make better hiring decisions.

Ensuring the right fit

Psychometric testing can take some of the guesswork out of hiring decisions

BY SHAWN BAKKER

In spite of their best efforts, many organizations struggle with consistently finding and hiring successful job candidates. To make better selection decisions, organizations use a variety of methods including application forms, interviews and reference checks. But many firms are turning to a less traditional tool to help separate the wheat from the chaff: psychometric assessments.

Psychometric assessments help people understand and predict behaviour. They are scientifically designed to provide a standardized measure of a candidate's general intellectual ability, work competencies and personality traits.

Employees vary widely in their productivity and psychometric assessments can help predict these differences. Using psychometric assessments can help organizations improve business performance through the identification and selection of effective employees. By distinguishing which candidates have the characteristics necessary to be successful, organizations can increase performance while decreasing training costs and employee turnover. While there are many different tests available, they can generally be classified into two broad types: ability and personality.

•Ability – A measure of “can do”: An ability assessment reveals what an individual can do. It measures a person's current level of knowledge and her capability to acquire further knowledge and skills. It also reveals a candidate's capabilities and learning potential. Examples of assessments that fall in this area include measures of intelligence, verbal ability and mechanical aptitude. Ability assessments are among the best predictors of job performance. Each question has a right answer, like the exams students take in school.

•Personality – A measure of “will do”: A personality assessment measures typical behaviour and discloses what candidates will likely do on a daily basis. It is designed to measure a person's preference for behaving in certain ways. Personality measures also reveal if the individual is easy to manage, works hard, offers innovative solutions and works well with others. These types of assessments do not have right or wrong answers, as they measure equally valid personal styles. Yet some personal styles are more effective in certain occupations



than others. Some personality assessments are designed for specific types of occupations. These tools measure a limited number of traits that have been found to significantly affect performance in a certain area. For example, there are assessments that identify effective salespeople, customer service representatives or managers.

Benefits of testing

•Potential for cost savings: Psychometric tests can be a cost-effective way to pare down the applicant pool. Tests can make the decision process more efficient because less time is spent with individuals whose characteristics, skills and abilities do not match what is needed. However, some tests require more time up front with individuals to determine who is and who isn't qualified. In these cases, tests can still result in savings from not training and compensating individuals whose productivity would be low or who would not remain on the job. Choosing the wrong candidate can be very costly in terms of training, errors made by a poor performer as well as turnover. Investing in testing can be a particularly worthwhile endeavour if it reduces the

number of wrong hiring decisions.

•Digging deeper: Psychometric tests provide information about an individual that is not easily obtained using other methods, such as interviews. Tests are also used for assessing characteristics that cannot be developed through training but are acquired over long periods of time such as personality traits or in-depth knowledge of a profession.

•Consistency: Using standardized tools ensures candidates are treated objectively by gathering the same information on each one. The standardized tests prevent subjective biases from creeping into hiring decisions.

Choosing the right test is the trickiest, and most important, step in using psychometric assessments. A recruiter needs to know what she is looking for in terms of the required knowledge, skills, and traits for the position. If she is hiring an accountant she might need someone who pays close attention to detail and has good math skills. If she is hiring a salesperson she might want someone who is outgoing, enjoys helping people and has a high level of stress tolerance. Once the recruiter knows what it takes for a person to be successful on the job,

she can search for tests that measure those traits and abilities.

However, not all tests are equally effective at predicting job success. Carefully read though the material provided by the test developers and reject any with unclear information. Find out how the test was developed and look at the information that supports the usefulness of the test. The best source of this information is a manual, which publishers of such tests should have available.

The use of well-constructed assessments can provide organizations with additional information to help match people to job demands, improve organization fit and address counterproductive behaviors. This results in lower turnover, better job performance, lower training costs and a more satisfied workforce.

Shawn Bakker is a registered psychologist at Psychometrics Canada, a company involved in the application of psychology in work, careers and education. He can be reached at www.psychometrics.com, sbakker@psychometrics.com or (800) 661-5158 ext. 238.