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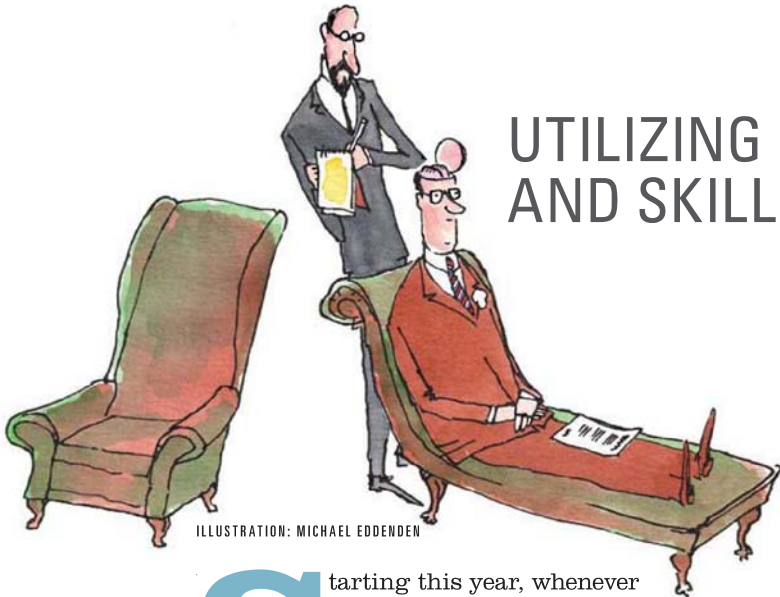


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UTILIZING PERSONALITY AND SKILLS ASSESSMENTS

Starting this year, whenever Lafarge North America hires new skilled tradespeople for its cement-making operations, there'll be a little piece of the company's best-and-brightest in every new hire.

That's because the company, as part of its new assessment testing for skilled tradespeople, benchmarked key plant positions against its very best hourly staffers in eight plants across North America. Through the use of personality, integrity, science and skills testing, the company created ideal profiles against which all new millwrights, electricians and control room operators will be measured.

Considering the safety-sensitive nature of Lafarge's 24/7 cement operations and the fact that the average Lafarge tradesperson spends their entire careers with the firm—averaging 30 to 35 years—ensuring fit is crucial.

"We want to test if the person works well as a team member, if they accept new knowledge, have an interest in acquiring new skills, if they have problem solving/critical thinking skills, are professional, have pride and respect for environment and safety, assess risks, are action-oriented, responsible, accountable, with integrity and leadership—all kinds of skills, competencies and core Lafarge values," says Francois Boucher, area HR manager, Lakes and Seaway Lafarge Canada Inc.

The assessments involve tests from several vendors, including WorkKeys (www.act.org/workkeys) for science knowledge, Valpar testing (www.valparint.com) for essential skills and 16PF personality testing (www.ipat.com).

And for potential hires that are used to working around machines, even the act of testing reveals a

lot. "It's a full day of assessment and it's exhausting," says Boucher. "We're taking tradespeople out of their comfort zones and observing them, which provides a lot of information."

Custom association publisher Naylor LLC uses the Harrison Assessment (www.harrisonassessments.com)—a job-suitability index that looks at people's preferences and tendencies—as part of its hiring process.

"It's an assessment that's based on performance enjoyment theory—that you excel at the things you like to do best," says Chip Sharkey, Naylor vice-president, human resources.

An individual's assessment is compared against generic templates for job types—such as sales manager, middle manager, specialist—that have been developed by Harrison. "But what we're really looking at is the individual," says Sharkey. "There's no pass/fail. What we get are data to focus on in interviews. For example, if someone has a low organization or planning score, and the job demands those skills, we'll focus in on that during interviews to explore past experience."

And while Sharkey says there's no absolutes in the assessments and hiring, when a person's profile points out glaring differences between personal preferences and job requirements, "there's not likely going to be a fit."

It's an approach shared by Wells Fargo Financial Canada with its use of predictive index testing for sales hires.

"With all assessments, if it's done right, you should be benchmarking against what a top performer looks like within your company, whatever the role, and not necessarily trying to hire a perfect match, but not hiring an inverse match," says Wells Fargo's Canadian HR lead, Rhys Spencer. "You don't want to hire an introvert for a sales job."

Spencer uses a Canadian testing company called Predictive Success (www.predictivesuccess.com)—a predictive index system that asks potential hires to select what they think best describes them from a series of competencies. The software then provides a two-page report that details the needs and drives of the individual.

"Ultimately, assessment testing is about validation," says Spencer. "It's a postscript. Here's

the job description, the job ad, and that's the profile from which the interview questions are built on. The test is the validation against the process—is the person who we think they are from what we've discussed with them?

“The risk of not doing [testing] is that hiring managers will hire someone just like themselves. And when you do that, there are bound to be hiring failures along the way.”

Although hiring against a profile will typically mean interviewing more candidates and a longer hiring process, it should translate into better fit and retention. Spencer attributes assessments to a big reduction in sales force turnover at Wells Fargo—44 per cent year over year since 2008. “The economy's probably the biggest reason, but I think a big piece has been knowledgeable HR consulting against our screening tests,” says Spencer.

Strategic hiring

While it's all well and good to aid your quest for the perfect hire with some well-interpreted assessments, what's often ignored by HR professionals is the prep work: especially a solid understanding of the role you're hiring for, says Rick Lash, national practice leader, leadership talent, at the Hay Group.

To get the most out of assessments, says Lash, “you really need to understand the role's key accountabilities—what are the critical few capabilities that differentiate average from superior performance in that role? Or, if the organization's strategy is changing, what implications does this change have on what the role has to deliver on?” Lash points to the example of a hospital that had a reputation for research excellence thanks to the top-notch scientists they hired to work in their labs. When the organization decided it needed to turn its research area into a revenue stream, it changed the scientists' job requirements from not only research excellence, but also entrepreneurial skill—“all of which has implications on what you're assessing for,” says Lash.

Spencer agrees: “Assessments allow you to examine changes in strategic direction and how that affects certain profiles,” he says. “You can shift your business thinking on who you want to hire, how you want to hire and who you want to promote, and provides the personality profile to do that. I think it directly links to your talent management strategy.” **HR**



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