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EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT

Putting hiring to the test

Some companies are becoming fans of using online psychological questionnaires that evaluate the suitability of potential employees



THINKSTOCK

RICHARD BLACKWELL

I have strange and peculiar thoughts: Yes or No.

I am worried about getting germs from doorknobs: Yes or No.

Those were two of the hundreds of questions I had to answer back in 1977 as part of a psychological test designed to see if I was suitable for the junior magazine-editing job I was applying for at a big Canadian publishing company. I guess I answered the right way, because I got the job – my first full-time position.

Thirty-five years later, I'm trying the modern version of the pre-employment psychological test. From the comfort of my desk, I'm surveying a computer screen full of more than 80 adjectives, checking off the ones that describe the way other people usually expect me to act. Helpful: check. Flexible: check. Easy-going: check.

Next, I do the same thing with a duplicate of the list, except this time I check off traits I believe really describe me.

In five minutes it is done, and the next day I get the results from Predictive Success Corp., the Canadian company that holds the rights to this test in Canada. According to my Predictive Index, I am cautious and conservative, a "cool, sometimes withdrawn person who's deep in thought," and detail-oriented. I have a "logic-based" decision style.

If I was applying for a job at a company that subscribed to Predictive Index, this would be crucial information to see if I match the traits my potential employer has decided are cru-

THE ONLINE BENEFITS

Online testing of potential employees has grown dramatically in the past few years, said Vykinta Kligyte-Culver, a consultant at Development Dimensions International in Toronto. Many companies see computerized tests as an efficient way to pare lists of applicants to a manageable number before choosing a few for face-to-face interviews, she said.

Like older written tests, these online tests attempt to pin down how creative or innovative an applicant is, and how motivated and adaptable. But online tests are easier to administer and assess, and can be done in much higher volumes.

The tests appeal to younger job candidates who are more comfortable answering online questions than sitting for a written test. To attract the best young job seekers, an online test "has to be pretty, it has to be interactive, and it has to be job-relevant," Ms. Kligyte-Culver said.

Still, said DDI's Canada's managing director Sylvie Ste-Marie, at some point there has to be a personal meeting with the short-listed candidates. "You get to the point where you actually have to meet your future employee."

One area where online testing has not penetrated deeply is at the executive level. For top positions, companies tend to bring in candidates to demonstrate their skills in presentations and role playing, Ms. Kligyte-Culver said.

Richard Blackwell

cial in the position. A bad fit, and I'd be back pounding the pavement.

For many companies, psychological testing has emerged as a crucial means of quickly weeding out job applicants who would be unsuitable, or unhappy, in a particular job. Those who use it say it has improved their recruitment dramatically, and sharply reduces costly errors in hiring employees who just don't fit with their corporate culture.

Still, only about one-third of companies currently use formal assessments during their recruiting process, according to research by talent management consulting firm Development Dimensions International Inc.

"I know it leads to fewer mistakes," said Ron Hyson, vice-president of human resources at Santa Maria Foods Inc., a Brampton, Ont., company that sells Italian food products. "It doesn't eliminate mistakes, but we make much better hiring decisions. There's no doubt about that."

Santa Maria Foods uses the Predictive Index for all its hiring, from entry-level labourers in its plant to the chief executive officer.

Mr. Hyson notes that the personality profiles the company is looking for varies, depending on whether the job is in sales, engineering, or elsewhere in the organization. But the test is so simple, and relatively inexpensive, that it can be used at all levels.

The test is just one part of Santa Maria's broader hiring process, which also includes one-on-one interviews and other kinds of evaluations such as

sales assessments (for sales jobs) and aptitude tests. But it is a crucial component that helps ensure people are a "cultural fit" – something that is very hard to pin down otherwise.

Mr. Hyson said a key benefit for potential employees is that it ensures they don't get hired for a job that they don't really want to do, and will thus end up hating. If a person is outgoing and likes dealing with people, but is applying for a job that mainly involves internal paperwork, the test will raise red flags.

David Lahey, president of Predictive Success, said the goal of tests such as his firm's Predictive Index (PI) is essentially "to help companies put the right person on the right seat of the bus at the right time," thus improving productivity.

Making mistakes in the hiring process can be hugely expensive, he said, particularly for smaller firms. It is tough to remove people when they've been hired, so getting the right people in place initially is critical. The PI is an objective "flashlight to see how they will behave and what their motivations are."

But it also needs to be combined with other recruitment techniques, including the "gut feel" of those doing the hiring, he said.

To prevent people from "gaming" the tests – answering what they think an employer wants to see – some tests have "placebo words" that mean nothing, and there is no obvious way to choose answers that will point in a certain direction.

The younger generation – Mr.

Lahey calls them the "Facebook crowd" – is used to answering surveys and having their personalities analyzed by outsiders, so they are comfortable with this kind of online questioning, he added.

David Towler, president of Creative Organizational Design, a Kitchener, Ont., firm that sells a wide variety of employee tests, said companies should not be testing "every warm body that walks through the door with a résumé."

Instead, firms should initially weed out people who are clearly not suitable, then use testing in the second round to choose the prime candidates.

He said he is "gob-smacked" that some companies do no testing at all. It costs only \$20 to \$150 "to make sure you have not hired someone else's reject," saving thousands in having to replace a bad hire in the future, he said.

Still, not every company believes testing adds value to the hiring process. Google Canada makes much of the need for its employees to embody "Googleness" – the ability to work in a fast-paced environment with flair and creativity. But it determines if new hires have those characteristics entirely through face-to-face interviews, not through any kind of personality test or evaluation.

The closest the company comes to a standard test, said communications manager Wendy Rozeluk, is that Google managers interviewing potential new employees often ask themselves: "If a flight was delayed or cancelled, how do I feel about being stuck at the airport with this person?"