

A Perfect Match

Personality Assessments Can Help Reveal Whether an Applicant is a Good Fit For the Job – and the Organization

By *Stephenie Overman*

Some companies use personality testing to help determine whether an applicant is a good match for a particular job. For example, an assessment might show that the individual has the traits needed to be a successful salesperson.

However, "A salesperson at IBM who is successful may be different from a salesperson at Dell," says Richard A. Goldman, general chief operating officer of Houston-based personality assessment provider Birkman International Inc.

That's why some businesses go one step further and use assessments to test for cultural fit, or the likelihood that the individual's temperament will mesh with the organization's culture.

Companies that know the differences between job-focused and culture-based personality tests—and that use them effectively—have a better chance of recruiting employees who will contribute positively to the business and who will stay at the organization long term.

What's The Difference?

Job-focused personality testing measures the long-term habits of potential employees—"how they tend to think, feel and act," says Murray R. Barrick, a professor at Texas A&M University and a Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology fellow.

In other words, do the applicant's personality traits fit the day-in, day-out logistics of performing the job? A gregarious extrovert, for example, may not be well-suited for a job in an accounting department where workers quietly scrutinize columns of numbers all day.

Barrick characterizes the results of job-focused personality assessments as "modest predictions of important things" such as overall job performance and "who will be the most successful employee." The company benefits from a good match every day the person comes to work, he says.

But, Barrick notes, job-focused personality testing "is not useful for predicting single acts of behavior"—such as whether an individual would commit a theft.

Culture-based personality testing, on the other hand, predicts a person's tendencies independent of the job, explains Ken Lahti, director of product strategy and development for PreVisor, a

talent measurement firm based in Atlanta. For example, an assessment might reveal that the candidate has all the skills to be a great salesperson but that the organization is too competitive or too bureaucratic for the individual's tastes.

The goal is to determine whether the individual's work style and values will mesh with the organization's, Lahti says.

Testing for cultural fit requires much more research, he notes. The vendor needs to customize the assessment process for each company by identifying a number of drivers, values or motivators central to the company culture and then translating those values into the core competencies that the business requires.

Culture-based testing is more complex than job-focused testing because it requires a clear understanding of the company's own personality as well as the applicant's, Barrick adds. "You need to have a pretty good understanding of what the organization's culture is and then take into account how a person differs" from that culture, he explains.

But an apparent mismatch may not necessarily be a bad thing, Goldman notes. If an assessment reveals that an applicant is likely to shake things up, that might be OK—"depending on what the company wants," he says.

Testing 1, 2, 3

Experts identify the following trends in personality assessments:

When? Both job-focused and culture-based testing are being used earlier and earlier in the selection process, according to Lahti. Companies are looking for ways to better handle an increased number of applicants, so they are beginning various types of testing almost as soon as the application process begins.

Who? Goldman finds that companies typically reserve assessments for higher-priced candidates. "They're not going to be using [assessments] for blue-collar jobs or [for jobs] stocking shelves at Wal-Mart," he says.

Some executive recruiters use cultural fit testing to narrow the search down to the final four candidates, he adds.

Lahti sees assessments being used across the board, although he agrees that companies are less willing to invest in testing for lower-salary jobs.

How? Most personality testing is done online now, Lahti says, because it can be administered remotely. An applicant can "take the assessment right upfront in the process, without direct supervision," he explains.

Efforts are always being made to improve the science of the personality testing process, Lahti adds. The most cutting-edge technology right now is computer adaptive testing, which allows the test to change questions based on each previous answer. This approach has been used for skills testing for a long time, he notes.

With a so-called static test, the same questions are given in the same order to each applicant. With computer adaptive testing, it's more difficult to know which questions will come up, so it's more difficult for test-takers to share questions or to try to influence the results.

Computer adaptive testing also allows for shorter tests because "you're only asking questions that give new information based on what you already know," Lahti says.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Unfortunately, testing for cultural fit "is almost faddish right now," Lahti says. "Many companies are skipping the basics. They think culture testing is a silver bullet.

"Culture fit has a value if you do it well. The main thing it predicts is retention. It will not tell if a person will be good at the job" the way a job-focused personality test will, he notes. "It's unfortunate that some companies believe culture fit is the only thing they need to think about."

In addition, companies sometimes don't realize "there are bad tests out there," Lahti says. "Not all tests are created equal. And even good tests may not be good for you." A one-size-fits-all test likely will not yield useful results.

However, when a personality assessment program is not working well, it's usually not the result of a poorly designed test, he says. It's more likely that the test was not used correctly.

Lahti says he has seen resistance—and worse—from managers. In one case, numerous candidates applying for a retail job had the same pattern of answers. Eventually, Lahti concluded that one manager was "going around the testing process," giving chosen applicants what the manager perceived to be the "right" answers.

Finally, it's important not to pin the hiring decision entirely on the test results, Lahti says. "The test should never be the only deciding factor. It should be integrated with other things you know about the candidate."

Be sure to clearly communicate the selection process to an applicant who does not make the cut. "Say, 'Based on a review of your interests as well as your experience and background, it is not a good fit,'" Lahti suggests. "Honesty about the process seems to be as important as the outcome."

Stephenie Overman is editor of Staffing Management magazine and author of Next-Generation Wellness at Work (Praeger, 2009).