

Personality tests

Profiles are only useful if they are related to future performance

Question:

What do you think about personality tests? Are these tests appropriate for selecting employees? Which ones are good? What do I need to know before I start using personality tests?

Answer:

This is a timely question, because personality tests are back in vogue with the rise of competency models, the EQ (i.e., Emotional Intelligence Quotient) phenomenon and an increasing emphasis on behavior in the workplace. Best selling books such as *“First, Break All The Rules,”* *“Now, Discover Your Strengths”* and *“Soar With Your Strengths”* have helped make personality testing more visible.

In response to your question, let me first point out that according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), a test is, “Any measure or combination of measures or procedures used to make an employment decision.” Taken literally, then, almost anything you are currently doing to screen employees is analogous to testing them. So, in that sense, personality testing is not much different than conducting an interview, reviewing an application blank, etc.

Yet, personality testing has been controversial because some of them ask seemingly strange questions that have little relationship to the world of work.

The point is that any selection device (e.g., tests, application blanks, interviews, ref-

erence checks, work samples, assessment centers, etc.) must be relevant to the context in which it is administered. If the test tells you nothing meaningful about a candidate’s capabilities, you have to ask yourself the question, “Why are we bothering with this anyway?”

For maximum utility, selection devices must measure attributes that relate to job success. These elements (some call them KSAPs — Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Personal attributes) must be job-based (i.e., so-called Bona Fide Occupational Qualifications — BFOQs), not person-based (e.g., you are related to the company president, you belong to the same college sorority as the hiring manager, etc.).

Furthermore, for maximum utility, selection devices must be reliable and valid. To deem a selection device to be one that “works,” there should be evidence that people who do well on it also do well on the job. Also, the reverse should be true — people who do poorly on it tend to be poor performers on the job.

So, how do personality tests measure up against the other selection devices that are available? Well, depending upon whose research you are reading, they stack up well to very well. The current thinking is that well-constructed, well-applied personality tests are valid predictors of job success for virtually all occupations. In fact, some research studies have shown that personality tests are the best predictors of job success, even better than intelligence tests.

Before you run out and find where you can lay your hands on a personality test, though, let me offer a few cautionary notes.

First, not all personality tests are appropriate for work settings. Many, in fact, are not appropriate and potentially illegal to use in making employment judgments. These would be clinical personality tests that measure emotional well-being and mental

health. These personality tests are appropriate where the work involves BFOQs having to do with public safety or access to dangerous material (e.g., police work, air traffic control, nuclear power work, etc.).

Clearly, you can see that making sure someone is mentally healthy is important when the public’s safety is at stake.

Unless your organization carries out work that poses a risk to the public, non-clinical personality tests are the best ones to use. These tests generally view personality as what is manifested in a person’s day-to-day behavior.

There are many non-clinical personality tests from which to select. The best ones tend to be built upon what has come to be known as the “Big Five” model of personality:

- **Stability** – The extent to which a person displays a steady, even-keeled demeanor.
- **Extraversion** – The extent to which a person is others-oriented and sociable.
- **Openness** – The extent to which a person is open to new experiences and changes.
- **Agreeableness** – The extent to which a person is a positive thinker and optimistic.
- **Conscientiousness** – The extent to which a person is achievement-oriented and task-focused.

Generally speaking, conscientiousness and extraversion have proven to be the most robust predictors of job performance. These factors seem to be the foundation for success in a variety of work settings.

My second cautionary note is that you need to be careful in selecting which personality test to use, even when choosing among the ones that measure the “Big Five.”

As an example, the most popular test of everyday personality is one called the Myers-

Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). It is based on Carl Jung's model of personality and has been administered for a half-century. However, the MBTI has not been well-studied in terms of its relationship with job performance. So, while it provides meaningful insight into someone's "personal style," it would be stretching the tool to use it for making hiring or promotion decisions. Better to use it for career development, personal effectiveness counseling, or team building.

My third cautionary note is that to do a good job of using personality tests, you need to know something about testing and test interpretation. Normally, this means holding an advanced degree in a behavioral science or having obtained proper experience and/or certification. Most reputable vendors of personality tests will not sell their products to individuals who lack proper credentialing.

This leads to my fourth cautionary note that is based on the observation that we live in an Information Age. Among other things, this means that if you type in "personality test" into an Internet search engine, you will get about 1 million hits. There is no shortage of personality tests out there in cyberspace. Many times, the only criterion these vendors are concerned with is, "Will you be using Visa or MasterCard today?"

So, you need to know who is your test publisher. Will they stand behind their product? Will they offer customer support? And so on.

Let me close by noting that, in case you haven't picked up on it, I believe that personality testing is serious business. But, in today's litigious society, so is using any selection device. So, you need to be an informed consumer when

you venture into this area. My best advice is that to get the most out of personality tests, you need to develop a relationship with an expert in their use — namely, an industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologist.

In the final analysis, a personality test is only as powerful as the person who is using it. So, when using this sophisticated "tool," make sure your employment selection "mechanic" has his or her "tool box" in order.



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