

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, December 7 2001

Looking to test prospective employees?

Here's a review of the options you'll have

By DANIEL SCHROEDER, *For Small Business Times*

Question: We're looking to fine-tune how we screen employees that we hire, especially supervisors and other higher-level positions. Right now, we review resumé/applications, conduct interviews, and check references. We're considering adding testing to the process. Can you provide an overview of some of the available tests and what we should know about them as we get started?

Answer: In many ways, employment testing is the most controversial method of selecting employees. Employment tests are sometimes seen as invasive or lacking job relatedness. On other occasions, there are concerns about the qualifications of the individuals responsible for administering and interpreting the tests. Despite those concerns, tests have been given to job applicants for decades. In recent years, with the emphasis on developing competency models of job performance, there has been a renewed interest in employment testing.

A couple of contextual points need to be made as we explore this topic. First, just what do we mean when we use the term "test?" From the standpoint of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), a test is "any measure, combination of measures, or procedures used as a basis for any employment decision." Taken literally, this means that you are already using employment tests in the form of an application blank and an interview. Tests, therefore, are not simply paper-and-pencil instruments — they are any data-gathering devices used to make judgments about a candidate's worthiness.

Second, what criteria are used to determine the effectiveness of the employment test? Technically, what we are talking about here has to do with the measurement properties of the test. Does the test provide consistent results? (Is it reliable?) Does the test accurately measure what it purports to measure? (Is it valid?) A useful test is one that is both reliable and valid. To demonstrate the effectiveness of a test, statistical studies are often undertaken in which test scores are compared with measures of job performance. The tests that do the best job of predicting job performance are the ones that should be used. That really cuts to the heart of the matter, doesn't it? How effective is the forecasting you do now on the basis of reviewing a candidate's resumé? His/her interview performance? You're probably not entirely pleased or you wouldn't be considering employment testing.

So, what are some commonly used employment tests? Here is a brief overview of the major types of employment tests:

Aptitude and ability tests

These tests measure different aspects of intelligence and problem-solving. Research has shown that cognitive ability is positively correlated with job performance. There are problems with hiring solely on the basis of these types of tests, however. For instance, minority individuals generally do not perform as well on them as do Caucasians. Also, aptitude and ability tests do not measure behavioral characteristics.

Personality tests

Personality tests are used to assess job-related behaviors associated with job performance such as risk tolerance, sociability, dependability, etc. In the past, these kinds of tests have been criticized for their lack of job relevance and for the ease with which test-takers distorted or faked their responses (e.g., projected a more positive image than was discernible in their day-to-day behavior). In light of recent meta-analytic studies, however, the utility of personality tests in predicting job performance has mounted. In fact, some researchers believe that personality tests are the best predictors of job success.

Interest tests

Interest tests assess the kinds of work that an individual might find to be satisfying. Research has demonstrated that while interests

influence career choices, the relationship with job performance is not as clear-cut. For example, someone who likes to sing while driving to work in the morning, but who lacks a strong singing voice, would be ill-served to pursue a career as a singer. Abilities and behavioral attributers must also be considered.

Honesty tests

Honesty (or integrity) tests are used to explore a job applicant's propensity to lie, deceive, steal, etc. The polygraph test (i.e., lie detector) as well as various paper-and-pencil tests are used to determine whether an individual represents a risk for dishonest behavior. Of course, the basic problem with these tests is that, for employment purposes, they ask applicants to be honest about their level of dishonesty. Nevertheless, despite this methodological issue, the research tends to support the usefulness of honesty tests, perhaps ideally when they are used in conjunction with a personality test that measures related factors (e.g., conscientiousness).

Physical tests

These kinds of tests measure physical attributes such as strength, stamina, flexibility, reaction time, etc. These tests are most relevant to physically demanding jobs. To be effective in predicting job performance, the physical standards associated with a job must be concretely defined. This requires a thorough job analysis (more on that later in this article).

Drug tests

Drug tests are among the most common tests used by companies today, with some studies indicating that as many as 80% of employers test their job applicants for drug use. Still, despite widespread use, drug testing is controversial due to its questionable validity when cheap and unsophisticated tests are employed. The Centers for Disease Control suggest the "false positive" (i.e., incorrectly indicating the presence of drugs) rate for some of these low-end tests approaches 70%. So, the lesson learned is to pursue a more sophisticated rather than less sophisticated program, if this type of test is going to be part of the selection system.

Genetic tests

Perhaps the most controversial of all of the tests are these tests that examine biological factors that may affect job perfor-

mance. With today's advances in genetic testing methods, scientists can identify genes linked to many different diseases. Employers may be concerned that the job performance of applicants who have genetic defects may be negatively affected or that they will have to pay higher insurance premiums. But to use genetic screening to select out certain applicants, the employer must demonstrate that the presence of a genetic defect poses a direct threat to the health and safety of others and that the genetic defect is a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ). The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 must be carefully considered when genetic screening is pursued.

In order to get started, the first thing you need to do when considering the use of any test is to determine whether it measures attributes that are relevant to job performance. That means that you must undertake a job analysis in which you document and define the duties and scope of the job along with its associated prerequisites having to do with knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics or behaviors (KSAPs), as well as functional or physical requirements. You'll find that, in addition to its importance in selecting employees, a properly done job analysis provides the foundation for many aspects of human resources, including job descriptions, performance appraisal, and training/development.

By identifying the requirements of the job, you can then decide how and where you will probe for evidence as you screen job applicants. As this column makes clear, you have many employment test options at your disposal. Becoming an informed consumer with respect to those choices is important. In our litigious society, you need to be sure that the screening techniques you are using are defensible. Aligning yourself with knowledgeable experts in the field of employment testing will help you to proceed with confidence.

Daniel Schroeder, Ph.D. of Organization Development Consultants, Inc. (ODC), provides HR Connection. Small Business Times readers who would like to see an issue addressed in a future column may reach him at 262-827-1901, via fax at 262-827-8383, or via e-mail at schroeder@odcons.com.

