

Welcome to FT.com, the global source of business news and analysis. Register now to receive 8 free articles per month.

THE LAST WORD

March 21, 2013 3:53 pm

## Games that help you screen job applicants

By James Shotter



Are you being served? The 'Wasabi Waiter' video game tests applicant skills

“If you would read a man’s disposition, see him game,” wrote the author Richard Lindgard in 1907. “You will then learn more of him in one hour than in seven years’ conversation.”

The revealing nature of play has long been known by psychiatrists. But in recent years, the business world has discovered it as well, with gaming technologies being used to enable better internal communication and as a tool for helping employees improve productivity.

Knack, founded by Israeli entrepreneur Guy Halfteck, hopes its gaming technologies will help companies hire staff. The start-up is not the first to combine the virtual world and recruitment. Organisations as diverse as [IBM](#), Marriott Hotels and the US Army have all experimented with giving potential applicants computer games to play.

While these games attempt to give an idea of how an applicant might perform in a specific job, Knack is after a bigger prize: using them to reveal which applicants possess specific skills – such as innovativeness or leadership – sought by employers.

The games seem simple. In one, called *Wasabi Waiter*, players take the role of a server in a sushi restaurant. The task is to tell what dishes customers want by judging their expressions. Happy customers must be served “happy” food, sad ones “sad” food, and so on.

Knack is not just testing the ability to read expressions. It is also measuring issues such as the speed required to perform tasks and the playfulness with which they approach the game. Since players tend to get caught up in the action, they are more likely to reveal their true selves.

Fifteen minutes is enough to yield one megabyte of data, says Mr Halfteck. Knack can then mine this information to draw conclusions about any number of traits.

However, John Funge, chief technology officer, concedes that not all qualities can be captured through games. Like everyone interpreting data, Knack’s models do not fit every scenario.

Some observers also wonder whether applicants might object to having their character traits laid bare. Unsurprisingly, Mr Halfteck is bullish. “People are naturally curious and interested to know about their own abilities and showcase their strengths, so I don’t think this will be a problem,” he says.

Pilot schemes with various organisations including Bain & Company, the consultancy, and the New York University Medical Centre, are under way.

One company that claims to have found the technology useful is [Shell](#). A project carried out with the company’s Game Changer unit, which focuses on innovation, used *Wasabi Waiter* and one other game. It says the technology helped increase its success rate at identifying innovators from about 30 to about 80 per cent. “It’s quite a big step forward,” says Hans Haringa, an executive in the unit. “We may well be sitting on the first measurable set of factors which make it possible to identify an innovator.”

Mr Halfteck hopes that by making its games available via apps and social media, Knack will also be able to gather enough data to become an exchange to match employee skills with the employers who need them.

Such services, says Alvin Roth, a Stanford University professor of economics, are likely to be most useful for hiring for younger people: “Senior markets tend to be thinner, and the candidates are more distinct, since they have a longer career path behind them.”

Whether or not Knack achieves its ambition, the use of gaming to understand people is here to

stay, says Sara de Freitas, professor of virtual environments at the University of Coventry. “The power of gaming is huge,” she says. “We are only beginning to grasp its potential.”

---

## You may be interested in

Troubled teenagers equal entrepreneurial success

Samsung puts firepower behind Galaxy

Snarky Puppy, Koko, London

VMWare: dual core?

Digital life for dusty old images

Philip Roth and the Nobel Prize in Literature

Focus shifts from talking shoes to wrists

Doomed Vienna

KSL buys Malmaison and Hotel du Vin

Li & Fung hit by US distribution woes

Restraint pays off for BlueMountain chief

My interference gene awakes ...

Budget 2013: Charities hail 'social investments' move

BTS on track for \$2.1bn IPO

Bored markets thirst for banks' blood

Downtown NY shows post-storm struggles

The List: five sporting couples

Allegation publicity power mooted for FCA

FSA apologises for conduct towards broker

More lenders pull out of interest-only

**Printed from:** <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/812e6856-8b18-11e2-8fcf-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.

---