Heads Up!

Personality assessments are being used more often in the hiring process. But what do they really tell you?

By Doni Meinert

Since March, thousands of job applicants in Australia have been required to take an online personality fit assessment that measures the personality traits, specifically those believed to be related to sales success, to customer awareness, integrity and the ability to collaborate.

Those are the core attributes that the transport company is looking for to attract high-quality recruitment.

"We have a lot of retirements coming up," says Mr. Smith, Amtrak's vice president of capital strategy and center of excellence. "We want to make sure we're hiring the right fit of individuals."
In just the first month, 5,000 applicants took the 45-minute online assessment, which was developed with the help of a consultant. Of those, 2,000 were determined to be a "strong fit" for the organization and will be the first to be interviewed. Another 1,800 were deemed a "moderate fit" and 1,200 were a "minimal fit," she says. Amtrak hires about 2,300 new workers nationally each year.

Some experts estimate that as many as 60 percent of workers are now asked to take workplace assessments. The $500-million-a-year industry has grown by about 10 percent annually in recent years. While many organizations use personality testing for career development, about 22 percent use it to evaluate job candidates, according to the results of a 2014 survey of 344 Society for Human Resource Management members.

'A good test, just like a good car, would have withstood strenuous technical tests just like a dummy crash.'

Deniz S. Ones, professor of industrial psychology, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

However, there are thousands of personality assessments available, and their quality varies. Some might even land an employer in legal trouble. So HR professionals should explore their options carefully before deciding whether a personality assessment is right for their company and, if so, which one to use.

Even after careful selection of an assessment, they shouldn't rely solely on the test results when making hiring decisions.

"This is not a silver bullet," Burki cautions. "It's one of the many variables that need to be factored into hiring a person," along with the applicant's experience, education, references and conduct during the interview.

Are the Tests Accurate?

Compared to other hiring selection practices, personality assessments are among the least effective in predicting job performance, according to research by Frank L. Schmidt, management and organizations professor emeritus at the University of Iowa. He found that they work best when they are combined with other measures, such as cognitive ability or integrity tests, that have a higher predictive validity.

However, Deniz S. Ones, professor of industrial psychology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, believes that a well-designed personality assessment, if used properly, can be a useful and accurate way to gauge if someone will be a good fit. The problem is that not all tests are created equal, she says. "A good test, just like a good car, would have withstood strenuous technical tests, just like a dummy crash."

Many assessments are based on the Five Factor Model, which consists of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Those assessments have been subject to the most evaluation by researchers.

But there are many popular and inexpensive personality assessments that are considered less valid for use in hiring. For example, four-quadrant tests, which are typically word association tests, shouldn't be used in the hiring process, says Whitney Martin, a measurement strategist at ProActive Consulting in Louisville, Ky. "They measure a person's "state," which can change depending on mood and environment, as opposed to enduring personality traits.

Ones advises HR professionals to avoid using tests that put people into one of a handful of categories or personality styles because these types of tests are too simplistic.

One of the best-known personality assessments, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, isn't intended to be used in the hiring process at all, according to the publisher of the test. "People of many different types excel at the same job for different reasons," the publisher's website states. "Individuals should not be pigeonholed based on their personality preferences."

Another popular tool, the Predictive Index, complies with U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidelines because it is a "free-choice tool," in which individuals choose the words that best describe themselves as opposed to being limited by multiple-choice answers, says Natasha Augustine, director of client engagement at R.H. Sweeney Associates, which is licensed to sell the Predictive Index tool in Texas.

While an individual's results can be affected by a stressful life circumstance, the tool produces consistent results over time, she says.

One criticism of self-report personality assessments is that job applicants will provide responses that they think the employer wants. In other words, applicants can fake the answers. But research shows they usually
Staffing Management

Phyllis G. Hartman

don’t—and even when they do, it doesn’t affect the ranking of the top applicants in a significant way, Ones says.

Even the most sophisticated tools leave room for interpretation. For example, most people want to hire an extrovert for a sales position. But that inclination might be wrong, cautions Phyllis G. Hartman, SHRM-SCP, owner of PGHR Consulting Inc. in Pittsburgh. She says her husband, whom she describes as quiet and introverted, has been successful in sales for 40 years. “He says the best tool for a salesman is his ears—listening, not talking,” Hartman says.

Frederick Morgeson, an organizational psychology expert at Michigan State University, says this of personality assessments: “It’s not destiny.” People can create workarounds and overcome their natural tendencies. “What we’re trying to do in the hiring context is to make the best guess as to how someone will behave in that job,” he says. “We’re improving the odds.”

A New Wave

Technological and scientific advances have ushered in a new crop of personality assessments that use computers and mobile games.

Pymetrics uses brain games based on neuroscience to assess 50 cognitive and emotional traits and to match workers’ skills to employer needs.

“It’s a bit like Match.com for work,” says Frida Polli, co-founder of Pymetrics in New York City.

Because the assessments are based on how the games are played, they produce more accurate results than assessments that require individuals to report on their own tendencies, Polli claims. The games are free on the company’s website, www.pymetrics.com.

California-based Knock offers an app that allows users to play games on their smartphones that determine how they think and work.

Morgeson at Michigan State says it will take time before researchers determine how well these new assessments predict job performance. “I wouldn’t rule those out, but I think we just don’t know,” he says.

Rating the Test

In selecting a personality assessment, one common mistake employers make is failing to focus on what they are trying to achieve. Some choose an assessment based on what other organizations are using rather than on their own company’s goals, Martin says.

“If the goal is to reduce turnover or absenteeism or drug use in the workplace, that’s a very different process than if you are a health care organization trying to improve patient satisfaction and trying to measure empathy in nurses,” she explains.

The strongest personality tests to use in the hiring process, she says, are those that:
- Measure stable traits that won’t change over time.
- Are normative in nature, comparing one applicant’s scores against others.
- Provide a “candidness” scale to indicate how likely it is that the results accurately portray the test-taker.
- Have high reliability, producing the same results if the same person takes it again.
- Have been shown to be valid predictors of job performance.

In researching personality assessment tools, HR professionals should ask vendors for the technical documentation that shows what the test was designed to measure, what group it was tested with and what workplace behaviors it can predict, Ones advises.

For help in understanding the technical

Questions for Vendors

When evaluating personality assessment tools, experts suggest starting with these questions:

- What is the assessment designed to measure, and how will that benefit the organization?
- Is the assessment reliable and accurate?
- Does it effectively predict important workplace behaviors that drive metrics affecting sales, customer satisfaction and turnover?
- Does it come with a job analysis tool that allows you to identify behavioral job requirements?
- How easy is the assessment to take?
- Does it come in multiple languages?
- How easy is it to interpret results?
- Is the assessment free of bias, and does it comply with federal guidelines?

‘Be careful that these tests actually measure the ability to do the job.’

Chris Kuczynski, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Assistant Legal Counsel

documentation, HR professionals can consult with the Buros Center for Testing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for free or fee-based reviews. The nonprofit Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology also has a consultant locator on its website. Another option is to seek help from an industrial-organizational psychologist at a local university.

It’s also critical that HR professionals determine how the business will measure the assessment tool’s impact, Martin adds: “Be able to show the metrics. Because if you can’t make that business case, you have to question whether or not it’s working.”

Are the Tests Fair?
There also are legal ramifications to consider.

Atlanta attorney Roland Behm claims some personality tests used by employers discriminate against individuals with mental illnesses in violation of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In 2012 and 2013, Behm filed discrimination complaints with the EEOC on behalf of his college-age son, Kyle, who was rejected for summer jobs by seven companies after completing online personality assessments. Kyle, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, noticed that the questions on the online tests were similar to medical evaluations he had undergone.

After Kyle took an online test for Kroger Co., Behm alleges, an employee told him he wasn’t being hired because he scored “red” on the test. The test was administered by Kronos Inc., Behm says.

Behm’s company against Kroger Co., along with another against PaySmart Inc., was wrapped into an ongoing investigation by the EEOC’s Baltimore office, and both were still pending when this article went to print, according to Behm. Representatives for the companies weren’t available for comment.

The test was based on the Five Factor Model and asked questions such as “Do you feel like you are happy all of the time, most of the time, some of the time or none of the time?”

If the EEOC files suit or the charges win, employ-ers using such tests could face huge liability “because anybody who took the test would have a claim,” not just

Evaluation Tools
The most common methods employers use to evaluate job candidates.

| Behavioral interviews | 62% |
| Online, minimum-qualifications screening questionnaires | 41% |
| Skills testing | 38% |
| Interviews with behaviorally anchored rating scales | 26% |
| Situational judgment questionnaires | 23% |
| Organizational fit questionnaires | 23% |
| Personality testing | 22% |
| Aptitude testing | 18% |
| Scorable job applications | 16% |

Source: SHRM survey commissioned by ACT, December 2014.
those who have mental illness, says Behm, whose son has now graduated from college with a degree in mechanical engineering.

The EEOC won't confirm or deny that an investigation is underway. In general, however, the agency would be concerned if the personality test is considered a medical exam because the ADA prohibits employers from requiring medical exams before a job offer is made, says EEOC Assistant Legal Counsel Chris Kuczynski.

Even if the personality test is not considered a medical exam and is given after a job offer is made, "we would be concerned whether the test is used in a way that it screens out or excludes somebody with a disability from a job," Kuczynski says.

"Be careful that these tests actually measure the ability to do the job," he warns. "They may generally measure the ability for some people to do the job. But they may not be predictive for everybody." The employer must show that the individual can't perform the essential functions of the job or that he or she could pose a direct threat or safety risk.

Employers also can be held liable if the tests they use inadvertently exclude groups protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. HR professionals shouldn't trust vendors that say their assessments have been validated without verifying the claim.

"Under Title VII, the employer—no matter what gives them the test—is the one responsible," says Esther G. Lander, a partner at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld law firm in Washington, D.C. While some vendors may promise to indemnify the employer, it's not clear how solvent they are, she says.

To minimize legal risk, make sure the assessment focuses on specific personality traits that have been proved to be linked to a specific job, says attorney Ashley J. Keapproth, also at Akin Gump.

**Timing is Everything**

There also may be times in a company's life cycle when personality tests shouldn't be used in hiring.

Such assessments aren't currently being used at Integra Life Sciences, based in Plainsboro, N.J., because the company is going through a transformation, says Padma Thiruvengadam, corporate vice president, strategic initiatives, operational excellence and chief human resources officer.

"We're very careful about not putting people in a box with personality tests because we need people who can transform the company and then succeed beyond," she says.

"Sometimes personality tests give you data that could narrow down the talent pool to something very specific and ... that might actually inhibit a company through transformation," Thiruvengadam says.

Once the company has achieved operational stability, she plans to use personality assessments as part of the hiring process, she says.

**Traits or Labels?**

Personality assessments spur strong debate among HR professionals and job candidates alike.

While Ralph Stewart, executive vice president and chief credit officer at Alabama Farm Credit in Cullman, Ala., acknowledges that personality assessments aren't infallible, he believes they increase his chances of making a good hire.

"I used to think when I hired someone that I had a 50-50 chance that it would work," Stewart says. With a personality assessment, he estimates that he has a 75 percent chance of the new hire working out. It's especially helpful when hiring recent college graduates with little work experience to evaluate, he says.

However, others worry about what their organizations might lose if they reject individuals who don't have the "optimum" personality traits for a position.

Linda Cummings, an HR consultant in the San Francisco area, recalls several occasions when hiring managers at her former companies ignored assessment results when the applicant interviewed well. "Had we made the decision to hire based on that personality test, we would not have hired some very good people," she says.

Sarah Babineau, SHRM-CP, president and CEO of Compass Metrics LLC, who advises companies on diversity issues, says she flinches when asked to take a personality assessment.

"I know I am different, and I usually like that about myself. Personality test results, however, have cumulatively made me feel that being so different is a bad thing," she says.

---

Dori Meiner is a senior writer for HR Magazine.