

WHO ARE YOU?

Personality assessments help some companies find out

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Who knew that, after high school and college, testing still could be a part of your future? OK, personal assessments -- such as personality and behavioral profiles -- aren't really "tests" in the nail-biting SAT sense, but they do involve questions and answers that can impact your career.

Reed Stephenson's search for a new job started with a promising interview with a company's hiring manager over lunch. That led to an in-house interview at the corporate office, which also went well.

"I was waiting for them to call me with a 'yes' or 'no,' but, instead, I was told that there was one more step," he said.

He was asked to schedule a personality/business case "review" through a consulting firm. What followed was an eight-hour battery of personality and workplace-

scenario assessments and interviews.

John Arnold Smith, senior vice president of Talent Solutions, a division of Lee Hecht Harrison, says his company uses personal profiles to help employees learn their strengths and weaknesses. "It was intense -- a draining and exhausting process -- and the company ended up determining that I wasn't the best fit and made an internal hire," Stephenson said.

That left him wondering if the hiring process could have been handled better. He figured it was expensive to have two people interview and test him for eight hours, and, because he wasn't given a copy of the results, there was no benefit to him in terms of career development. The whole experience left a bad impression.

Fortunately, Stephenson had a better experience with his current employer, Havertys, where he was hired as senior supply chain analyst through company interviews.

"They gave me a short personality profile to help with career development and to see how I'd interact with the team, but I already knew I was on board. It felt like a much better use of an assessment tool," he said.

Testing instruments aren't new in the American workplace, but their use seems to increase with hiring activity.

"Personality assessments go all the way back to Socrates, who developed the first categories of personal styles," said John Arnold Smith, senior vice president and regional leadership specialist for Talent Solutions, a division of Lee Hecht Harrison that concentrates on leadership coaching. "In his observations, Socrates noted that people fell into two categories in two levels: extrovert/introvert and thinker/feeler."

That core premise has generated ongoing research and a range of assessment tools that test aspects such as personality, behavior, management potential and integrity. Two of the most popular, reliable and validated tools are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (personality) and the DiSC Personal Profile (behavior).

Inscape Publishing has refined its version of the DiSC instrument -- based on the 1928 research of psychologist William Moulton Marston -- for nearly 30 years and has given the test to more than 40 million people. The company explains that "DiSC instruments are based on the simple idea: that the foundation of personal and professional success lies in knowing yourself, understanding others and realizing the impact of your actions and attitudes on other people."

Screening candidates

Many companies believe assessments help determine if someone has the necessary skills and traits for the job. The American Management Association found that 44 percent of its members who responded to a recent study use tests to select employees. The Society for Human Resource Management says that 40 percent of Fortune 100 companies use some form of psychological testing in employment selection.

More candidates are seeing assessments crop up in job searches and, later, as companies seek to enrich their human resources through career development activities.

"If the profile used is a reliable and valid assessment, administered fairly and not used as the sole qualifier for getting a job, I think the values outweigh the potential harm," said Mickey Parsons, chief executive coach at Parsons Associates Coaching, an Atlanta-based career and executive coaching firm.

Economics are one reason companies turn to more objective tools like personal profiles, he said.

"Six years ago, a 2-inch employment advertisement might net 60 applicants. Today it could be 600," he said.

Narrowing the field has become a bigger challenge. "In a tight economy and a competitive jobs market, companies want to get the absolute best fit for the job. Hiring and training are very expensive, and it's better for everyone, including the candidate, if the person hired is suited for the position," Parsons said.

Bosses no longer can afford the luxury of hiring someone they like and hoping that he or she can learn to do the job.

"We are painfully struggling from a loyalist to a performance-based work culture, and employers perceive that testing can help them," Parsons said.

Considering the number of recent plant closings, company bankruptcies and buyouts, it's clear why there's a sense of urgency about finding and keeping the right people, he explained, adding: "If the job search has been long and costly, companies don't want to have to do on-the-job training. They want someone who can do the job now."

Pluses and minuses

Businesses that use assessments effectively often cite reduced employee turnover and higher productivity as benefits, but they've also learned to be cautious about the legalities. To get the results

they're seeking -- employees who fit the job description and company culture -- while avoiding lawsuits, companies need to know what to measure; choose a test that is unbiased, fair and reliable; not make it the only hiring criterion; have trained professionals interpret the results; and know the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's standards, according to the U.S. Department of Labor O*NET manual, "Testing and Assessment: An Employer's Guide to Good Practices."

Personal assessments are best used to facilitate better employee/job requirement matches when "the information is used to enrich the interview dialogue," Parsons said. "Someone may match the profile for a sales position, but, when you dig a little deeper, you find that their phone and computer skills are better suited for an accounts manager."

Brett Stevens, president of the SearchLogix Group, is no longer a fan of assessments and has discontinued using them in his international executive search and recruiting company.

"A test only gives a snapshot of someone. It doesn't account for any outside variables, like his home life, or tell us how a candidate would handle a hurdle on this particular job," he said.

Stevens advocates scrutiny of the person's track record and better interviewing techniques.

"We find that multiple interviews conducted by different managers give better information. By the time you go through a number of interviews, you know a lot about someone's personality," said Ray Bouley, president of Full Circle Real Estate Marketing, a marketing and advertising firm for builders and developers. "We found the assessments too general. They didn't speak to a person's depth of industry knowledge or expertise.

"Tests just don't seem to go deep enough. It was a cost that wasn't giving back."

One use of assessments that has both employers and employees more enthusiastic is career or leadership coaching. Businesses hire Smith's Talent Solutions and Parsons' coaches to help manage their talent. They want to encourage employees to develop the leadership skills that will enhance their careers and meet company objectives.

"We use personal profiles and share that with employees to help people gain insight into their attitudes, behaviors and potential in the workplace," Smith said. "By linking those insights into real-world-tested best practices, we as coaches and HR consultants accelerate the transformation of insight into action. We can help people capitalize on their strengths and work on their weaknesses."

When people are good at what they do, they're happier, Parsons said. "An assessment can be a springboard for someone to know themselves better and to see how they communicate with others. It might even lead to an 'aha!' moment, like 'Hey, accounting isn't where I need to be!'"

