

Popularity of Pre-Employment Testing on the Rise

By Lynn Brown, CHRP

Incorrect hiring decisions can be a serious drain on resources. Consequently, many human resources professionals are looking for new and effective ways to ensure they have the right fit in their organizations.

“Corporations that are really serious about finding the right person need to go beyond interviewing. They need a subjective measurement and that is one of the factors driving pre-employment testing,” said Dr. Larry Cash, president, Cash Lehman.

Pre-employment testing is a broad term that describes everything from simple computer programs that screen skills to sophisticated psychometric tools that can predict performance. Some organizations use testing to pre-screen candidates while others use them to choose between very similar candidates as the last phase of recruitment.

“Even ten years ago, there were only a few tests available,” said Dr. Brenda Tomini, an industrial psychologist in private practice. “Now many publishers are offering tests for the business market.”

Although computer based tests have been available for some time, another change has been the level of automation, especially web-enabled tools. “The main advantage of this is that the client doesn’t have to be physically present,” Dr. Tomini said. “You can test someone in Vancouver, for example, before going to the expense of flying them to Toronto for an interview.”

“Seventy per cent of the top 500 companies in Canada use some type of pre-employment testing,” said Dr. Cash. “People are now becoming more sophisticated about testing, however, that wasn’t always the case. In the past there were companies that wouldn’t use psychometric testing as a point of principal, ‘why would you ever pay money for that.’ That resistance isn’t there anymore.”

Beyond the basic aptitude and spelling tests are a multitude of pre-employment testing options. Intelligence tests measure the candidate’s aptitude or ability to quickly acquire knowledge. Specialized areas such as customer service or sales may utilize a

Job Skills test to measure specifics such as negotiation ability or persuasiveness. Personality tests can be used at all levels to measure an individual’s pattern of thinking, feeling and behaving. Management tests can predict a person’s potential success in a management role by measuring leadership and performance dimensions.

One of the challenges, particularly for psychological tests, is to ensure what you are buying. “Organizations need to be rigorous in choosing tests and do their due diligence,” Dr. Tomini said. “Make sure the product is testing the things your company needs. You want something with solid research and good benchmarks behind it, not just a good looking report.”

As testing has become more sophisticated, companies are developing higher expectations in recruiting. “Many companies are tailoring their own tests to reflect the nature of their businesses,” said Patty Parsons, director of operations, Sundance Personnel.

“There is no silver bullet test,” said Mark Palmer, president, Palmer and Company, an executive search firm. “We are less inclined to use single tests, but rather a battery of tests. You need a qualitative and quantitative perspective.”

Testing is certainly part of the process in hiring senior management and key personnel where incorrect hiring decisions can be very costly. “The more senior the position, the greater the impact—positive or negative—it might have on an organization,” Palmer said. “You should be certain you optimize your decision.”

Testing can prove to be an effective management tool as well. “To be aware of any potential weaknesses is to be forewarned. The cost of bringing in someone from the outside, not just in terms of recruitment costs, but also the honeymoon period as they get up to speed, again testing helps to lower the risk,” said Palmer.

Paul Frederick, vice-president, human resources, TLC Laser Centres agreed: “Integrating the pre-employment assessment results into a development plan is necessary as part of the constant need to optimize the human capital in organizations.”

CAA South Central Ontario has determined to broaden their testing to focus more on an integrated approach to HR that stems from the core of finding the right person and moving forward with that person through their career. "Our current assessments are helpful for hiring decisions but we require more information for coaching and development as well as defining interview techniques for specific candidates," Cynthia Hillaby, CHRP, vice president, human resources said.

Whether you are using it to pre-screen a wide selection of candidates, as part of an in-depth process in the final selection of key personnel or beyond the hiring stage for performance management and succession planning, pre-employment testing can prove to be a key resource for today's human resources professionals.

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