

# TraitSmart

Article from HR Magazine *February 2002 Vol. 47, No. 2*

## PERSONALITY COUNTS

**Psychological tests can help peg the job applicants best suited for a certain job**

**Steve Bates**

Often during the past decade, Tim Burke, CEO of Quest, a technology consulting and management company based in Sacramento, Calif., has had trouble finding the right people for jobs. Although everyone seemed qualified when hired, he says, the company “had a number of misfits consistently, and that bothered us. Some of our biggest challenges have been when we’ve hired a person who is not right for the job.”

About a year ago, Burke decided to start using a personality test to help screen job candidates for attributes that would help them succeed in a position. Since then, “we’ve had a significant improvement” in matching applicants with jobs, he says.

Burke had heard about such tests more than a decade ago but, like many people, was skeptical that personality assessments could be a legitimate, useful tool in his HR arsenal. Now he is so sold on them that he also uses a personality test to help existing workers determine if they would better fit another part of Quest’s operation. Although some job applicants and existing workers have resisted testing initially, some employees say they learned so much about themselves that they have asked Quest to test their family members, too.

*“It helps us understand who the core person is,”* says Burke.

Can a questionnaire asking people how they react to various situations truly gauge human nature and tell us what jobs they might do best? According to a substantial number of researchers around the world, the answer is a resounding yes.

Although experts warn that many personality assessments don’t deliver what they promise, legitimate scientifically validated tests are helping employers evaluate job candidates to select those best suited for particular positions. Other tests are designed to measure intelligence, honesty, management aptitude and other qualities.

No one has hard statistics about how many employers test job applicants’ personalities. Some testing experts estimate that roughly 40 percent do so and say the proportion appears to be rising.

As the economy tightens and employers focus on a lean workforce and on workplace security, the experts say, employment tests could take on added value. “There is a new interest in personality testing and psychological testing with recent reports of workplace violence and the events of Sept. 11,” says Ron Adler, president of Laurdan Associates Inc., an HR management consulting firm in Potomac, Md., and a member of the Society for Human Resource Management’s Employment Committee.

### **Navigating the Test Maze**

Thousands of personality tests are available commercially. In order to take advantage of them, however, HR professionals and executives must navigate a sometimes bewildering maze of jargon and claims by test vendors and consultants. Yet many HR professionals lack the background in psychology and statistics to evaluate the value of various tests or the claims of vendors or consultants who recommend them.

Accordingly, says William G. Harris, executive director of the Association of Test Publishers, a Washington, D.C.-based group that advocates responsible testing, HR professionals should be careful about getting the right tests—and the right consultants to start them on the path (see “How to Get Started”).

“Ask them to express their biases up front,” he says. “Talk to a few. You don’t hire the first person you see.”

Because of the depth of the scientific research behind legitimate employment tests, HR professionals should expect to pay serious money for quality assessments based on a specific theory of job performance, says R. Wendell Williams, managing director of ScientificSelection.com, a test consultant based in Atlanta.

Even if it takes \$20,000 or more to customize and validate a test as a predictor of performance in a particular job, plus \$50 or more per applicant tested, says Williams, “it’s going to cost less than one or two turnovers” caused by hiring the wrong person because of a lack of salient information.

Test experts caution HR professionals to define exactly what they hope to accomplish with a personality assessment before getting started. In addition, they warn that no test approaches 100 percent accuracy and some applicants lie to try to skew results in their favor.

### **How Assessments Work**

Personality assessments shed light on each person’s needs, attitudes, motivations and behavioral tendencies—many of which have a biological component. A century of research—accelerated and made more accurate in recent years by the advent of the computer—has led some experts to focus on a small number of personality factors that seem to relate to performance in the workplace.

Some experts say three relevant personality factors relate to the workplace; some say only one—the drive to reach our goals—does so. However, consensus is building in the research community that five factors shape our overall

personality, and researchers and testing firms are trying to use all five to measure job fit (See, “[Measuring Personality](#)”).

These dimensions are our relative need for stability, whether we are solitary or social, whether we strive more for innovation or efficiency, the degree to which we stick to our positions or accept others’ ideas, and whether we are more linear or flexible in our approach to goals.

Personality tests consist of series of questions that gauge a person’s natural comfort level within these categories. For example, test-takers might be asked to rate themselves on a numerical scale as to how well they believe that they:

*Bounce back quickly from disappointment.*

*Share personal information with work associates.*

*Enjoy taking care of details.*

*Take credit when it is deserved.*

*Are driven to be “No. 1.”*

There are no “wrong” answers to personality tests—only results that suggest an individual is better suited to one type of work than another.

That’s the kind of information that Quest CEO Burke wishes he had years ago, citing the example of an outside salesperson who struggled at making sales and was anxious about it. Testing showed that the worker might do better in an inside customer-relations job, and the change was successful.

Even in certain types of jobs, ideal personalities may vary. Some high-tech workers are best suited to sitting alone in a corner cubicle writing computer code, he says, while others flourish working directly with customers.

In their book *The Owner’s Manual for Personality at Work* (Bard Press; 2000), Pierce and Jane Howard wrote about a trial lawyer who was highly successful and wealthy but miserable in her work. A personality evaluation showed that she was an introvert and “team player,” whereas the classic profile of a courtroom litigator is that of an extravert who tries to impose his or her will on a judge or jury.

After getting career counseling, the lawyer decided to teach law and is much happier, say the Howards, who run the Center for Applied Cognitive Studies (CentACS), a test vendor and consultant in Charlotte, N.C.

### **Recognize the Limitations**

But even the most ardent advocates of personality testing note its limitations.

“Well-designed tests can be very useful,” says Ann Marie Ryan, a psychology professor at Michigan State University. But on occasion, Ryan says, researchers have to stop and ask themselves, “What do they really do?”

For example: Does the science behind personality tests prove that we’ll never be able to overcome our inherent tendencies, no matter how hard we work to change? When a test indicates that a worker is in the wrong job or in a career for which he is poorly suited, should he abandon that dream?

Cindy McCauley, a vice president at the Center for Creative Leadership, a nonprofit educational institution in Greensboro, N.C., says that's where testing leaves off and choice takes over.

She says that when an assessment at her center shows a significant misfit between personality and job, counselors tell the test-taker: "This is really going against your grain. Are you really willing to do something to overcome this, or would something else be a better fit?"

In addition, some experts question whether too much reliance on a personality test will lead to organizations full of "clones" and screen out capable people who would contribute differently.

And researchers caution against using a personality test as the only criterion in hiring.

"I would never use a personality test by itself," says Pierce Howard of CentACS. "I would never use a cognitive [intelligence] test by itself. Use a combination of predictors."

Harris of the Association of Test Publishers agrees. "A personal assessment should not be a substitution for measuring a person's skill or knowledge," he says. "Include it in your battery" of evaluation tools.

### **Avoid Legal Pitfalls**

Employers also should be careful that their use of personality tests does not run afoul of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act and the guidelines of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as well as various state laws aimed at preventing discrimination and other unfair practices.

In a highly publicized case in 1993, Target stores agreed to pay more than \$1 million to about 2,500 prospective security guards who had taken a lengthy employment screening test that included deeply personal questions and that some experts say was designed to be administered to mental patients. Among questions on the true-false test were: "I never indulge in unusual sex practices" and "I feel sure there is only one true religion."

The retail chain admitted no wrongdoing but agreed to stop using the assessment, which allegedly ran afoul of California privacy and discrimination laws. In 2000, a similar case was settled by Rent-A-Center, a Texas-based appliance rental company that had been using a psychological test.

The Target case "scared off a lot of corporate folks from any kind of personality testing," notes Jane Howard of CentACS. Yet despite the mistakes of some employers who test job candidates, lawsuits have been relatively rare, says Ohio University researcher Scott Finlinson.

People who were not hired because of the results of a personality test have had little success in the courts, says Finlinson, who has examined thousands of such lawsuits. Employees have fared a little better with allegations that they lost promotions because of personality test results, but such cases rarely lead to monetary damages, Finlinson notes.

Based on cases he's reviewed, if a personality test is job-related, if it doesn't discriminate against any racial or ethnic group, and if it doesn't invade privacy unnecessarily, "you'll be in good shape. Use common sense.

"In virtually all the cases that employers lost, they used the wrong test or they blatantly used a test to discriminate," Finlinson says. "It's the people who misuse it or abuse it or just don't know what they're doing who run into trouble."

### **Online Users Beware**

One potential problem is using a test just because it is easily accessible from a desktop computer, says Michigan State's Ryan.

Growing interest in personality assessment has prompted a surge of Internet-based vendors, some of which suggest that they can find the perfect career match with a few mouse clicks. "They seem to be coming out of nowhere," says Ryan. "It's a buyer-beware market."

Other online tests exist just for fun, or to offer a glimpse into the world of personality assessment. (For example, a free online test at [www.SnowWhiteTest.com](http://www.SnowWhiteTest.com) tells users which of the Seven Dwarfs he or others most resemble during business meetings (most take after "Doc").

The American Psychological Association and other groups have established standards for test publishers and administrators, but there are no enforcement mechanisms.

"There are so many players out there, a few companies are going to have to rise to the top and set the bar," says Carol Rudder, CEO of DiscoverME, an online personality testing firm based in Prairie Village, Kan. Rudder, who recently co-authored an SHRM white paper on personality testing (see "Using Personality Assessment in Personnel Selection"), says HR professionals can face "tremendous problems"—including bad hires and litigation—if they are not trained properly to administer and interpret assessment tools.

However, Rudder says, the rapid growth of tests on the Internet has at least one advantage: "It has forced the industry to be very up-front, to show that it has a very structured, very numerically oriented product. There's more and more evidence to show that it's not mumbo-jumbo."

Adds Hodge Golson, president of Management Psychology Group, a personality testing firm in Atlanta, a legitimate employment test "is not something developed over the weekend by a bunch of guys with a six-pack."

### **Putting Tests to the Test**

Last year, when Kris Moriarty went to work for the Blood Bank of Central Iowa as HR director, she discovered that the Des Moines-based operation was using a personality test to help judge job candidates.

"I was skeptical about these kinds of things," says Moriarty, so she took a test herself. "I thought it would be interesting to see what I found." She quickly became a convert.

“It was uncanny. It nailed me—what I do well, my shortcomings,” she says, adding that the test is now an integral part of her hiring process.

“It helps me tailor interview questions on areas where a candidate might have a weakness,” she states. “For example, if I am hiring a nurse and a profile indicates that this person is not good on details, it weeds them out. It’s a great starting place.”

At Big Save Inc., a diversified grocery chain with convenience stores, gift shops and food service operations based in Eleele, Hawaii, every job applicant must take a personality test, says HR manager Lisen Berquist. Hiring managers are trained to interpret and explain test results, she says.

“A personality assessment is used as a tool. It’s not absolute,” says Berquist. “It’s not an infallible profile. The hiring manager must take a holistic view of the applicant to ensure that there is a good match.”

Some experts say that approach can help many employers because the interview process is a surprisingly weak link in many companies’ hiring practices.

“Most interviews are not successful selection tools,” says Steven Abraham, an associate professor in the business school of the State University of New York in Oswego. “Interviewers tend to make snap judgments” instead of using all the information that is available to them, sometimes including personality assessments, says Abraham. That makes more objective tools, such as legitimate employment tests, more valuable and perhaps essential.

Despite a century of advances in psychology and technology, “the concept of [employment] testing and the types of things assessed have changed very little” over the decades, says Charles Wonderlic, president of the Wonderlic testing firm in Libertyville, Ill., which his grandfather founded in the 1930s.

“New technologies have improved their accuracy and efficiency,” says Wonderlic, but human nature—and the need for talent—are timeless. It’s still true, he says, that “the only way to survive and remain competitive is to find the best” employees.

*Steve Bates is senior writer for HR Magazine.*