

## Personality Testing Grows in the Workplace

All of the speakers of the following statements have something in common.

*"We want to develop a process that balances sales and operational roles of our bank tellers."*

*"We are creating an executive succession program."*

*"We hire armed security guards."*

*"We have five job families that we consistently recruit for. We want to get better at selection."*

What do they share? The answer is an interest in personality testing for their workplaces.

Such testing has achieved an admirable growth rate in these no-frills times, according to William G. Harris, Ph.D., executive director of the Association of Test Publishers (ATP): "We do a survey of members every year. Those who participated in employment testing over the last three years reported 10–15% growth per year." (ATP, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit association for providers of tests and assessment tools.)

Indeed, the Internet search service Overture reported about a thousand Internet searches in November 2002 alone on various phrases that mean "employee personality test."

### **Pre-employment Testing**

Employers find applications for personality tests both before and after the hiring process. Harris believes the majority of this testing, however, takes place before hiring. "You have to look at why most companies do testing," he says. "First, it's to get a candidate who's likely to succeed in the job. Second, to find a fit with the organization. Third, to find attributes that are likely in a good employee who will stay."

According to Harris, profits can be influenced directly by hiring decisions that are based on pre-employment testing. "The retail industry has for a very long time used testing at the pre-employment level to measure a tendency among candidates to be less than honest. After all, one of the major factors that can ruin a retail business is internal theft," he says. "That type of assessment has continued to be a strong part of the testing business."

Was there any impact from September 11? Harris observes that the number of firms who employed security guards increased: "Part of selling security services is selling the idea that your people are fully assessed for psychological stability. And if the jobs require use of weapons, most companies use some kind of Integrity measure before they finalize an offer." Integrity, in this context, is a measurable personality factor that covers many aspects of honesty and trustworthiness. He notes an increase of testing in some healthcare environments as well, especially for individuals who handle medical materials.

"I attribute the upswing to a general recognition of the importance of personality in making the right fit with jobs over the last decade," he concludes. "Research showing this has cascaded down into the marketplace."

### **Personality Testing for Training and Development**

Once a person graduates from "candidate" to team member, the applications for personality testing are far from exhausted. "At this level, people don't call asking for an assessment. They call because they want to get past a barrier," says Wendy Alfus Rothman, president of The Wenroth Group (in New York City) and a 20-year veteran of the coaching and development field.

For example, two classic barriers to progress in a management career are poor self-awareness and

resistance to feedback. Test results, delivered to an employee by a skilled coach, can be used to help someone break down these barriers.

In developmental work, Rothman says that tests are—and should be—far less visible than during the pre-employment phase. But they are no less vital. “In development, the instruments should not be apparent to people—but they serve as the absolute foundation of the subsequent coaching,” Rothman explains. In other words, the tests should provide information for the coaching process, but they should not dominate it.

Rothman sees post-hire testing on the rise: “Because the merits of testing are now widely accepted, more people are using tests.”

### **Impact of Slow Economy**

What happens to testing in a slow economy? Harris says that hiring drives the workplace testing business, so he foresees a leveling off of growth rates until hiring rebounds.

However, the developmental applications may balance the effects of slow hiring. Rothman notes that lean times have actually spurred some companies to make the investment in their best people. “They need to run as efficiently as possible,” she says. “Coaching is a gift for a good performer, and testing is sometimes behind the gift. Testing gives you such a great head start towards measurable results.”

Personality testing has clearly gained its niche in the employment world, but its use is complex. This article is the first in a series. In the next e-let, we’ll look more closely at what pre-employment testing can and cannot do for the selection and hiring process.

Does your company currently use workplace personality tests for any purpose? If yes, how do you use it? For pre-employment selection? To support training and development? If not, are you actively considering it for either of these purposes? Let us know at [surveys@performanceprograms.com](mailto:surveys@performanceprograms.com).

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