

Hiring Tests like Chicken Soup?

The record low unemployment with the lean and mean operating philosophy is causing companies to take a hard look at how to improve hiring efficiency. Testing is one consideration. If a company is currently using a screening test where it seems to provide value, then by all means, continue to use it. In that case, it is like chicken soup—it can't hurt. However, if a company is contemplating adding testing to its hiring system, then it should be careful. Besides the legal issues, the tests might not be the answer.

For this column, we will distinguish between two types of testing—practical applications and indirect testing.

Tests for Job Skills Encouraged

The practical application tests are those where an applicant is tested on relevant skills. For example, a CNC programmer is required to setup a lathe. The purpose is to design a test that is directly applicable to the candidate's job function. Just because a person lists a job skill doesn't mean expertise. Therefore, whenever possible, these tests should be *consistently* applied. Practical screening tests can save a lot of time and effort in the hiring process.

Indirect Tests Questionable

Indirect testing is defined as any test where a candidate's skill or trait is decided by alternative methods other than direct measurement. The most common are written tests where a person's personality or some other intangible quality like honesty is determined. One test uses 156 multiple-choice questions where preferences like selecting cooked carrots over raw carrots reveal personality traits. As we can imagine, this controversial arena is loaded with legal pitfalls. Moreover, I think the tests lack validity. The PhD's would hold the opposing view and consider that statement to be absolute heresy.

Be Sure Test is Used as Intended

Nonetheless, if a company feels that a test is a viable tool then it better make sure that it has been approved for its intended purpose. In the middle of a lawsuit is not the time to find out the test was meant for a different application. Once in place, a good correlation between the test's results and on-the-job performance must be documented.

Tests Valid for How Long?

If assume for a second the tests are valid—they measure what they say the do—the question is in what time frame? Ever play golf like a pro one day and the next you couldn't keep the ball from going out of bounds? Do you think our mental states are any different? How we feel today may mean a different “score” versus tomorrow.

Of course, the rebuttal is that basic human behavior doesn't change. At the same time, we probably agree that inherently human nature is consistent. We prefer good over evil, tend to be honest versus dishonest, etc. Therefore, how do we significantly differentiate one person from another? Another problem with written tests is that we interpret words and phrases differently. At best, these tests may be just an indication of a person's make-up, but is it enough to make a hiring decision? Unfortunately, people do and it's a mistake. Regrettably, much more weight is given to these tests than what was ever intended.

Do You Want Actors?

In an effort to improve hiring efficiency, one major automobile company has instituted a hiring testing program where a candidate is put into a role-play. The purpose is to “act out” a typical day in his/her new job. Unique concept and might make sense if you need actors who happen to have the desired talent.

Correlation Coefficients

To scientists, a good correlation coefficient means that they have a certainty, usually at a 95% confidence level, that a particular observation means another fact can be inferred. Quality Control relies on these principles every day. If they inspect 100 bolts, then statistically they can feel confident the whole box of bolts meet specifications.

Using the same tools to test a hypothesis—if a person's right eye is blue what are the chances the left eye is also blue. If our study found a 99% correlation coefficient then that supposition would seem reasonable.

The above example used “hard” facts. What if we went to a “soft” example like honesty. First, we would need to determine what questions to ask. Of course, we have take into consideration that some people will cheat. In addition, how many questions should we ask? At what point does the quantity of testing affect the quality?

What's Honesty?

For the moment, we'll forget the tremendous difficulties in devising a test for measuring honesty. How about starting with defining honesty? Maybe we should ask people this question: "On a scale of one to a hundred, with a hundred being totally honest and one being totally dishonest, how honest are you?" If a person answers 95 is that significantly different from an 85 answer. It might not be if the 95 person thinks stealing office supplies is not dishonest where the 85 does.

Let's move on and assume we have a test to give to the next hundred hires. Subsequently, everybody under a score of 50 but nobody above 85 was caught stealing. How comfortable would we feel instituting that test as a hiring criterion? We might be a little hesitant if we consider maybe the people who had an 85 or better might be too smart to be caught.

What's the Truth?

Suppose a person has the left eye covered and claims it is not blue. We can discover the truth by just uncovering it. In contrast, if a test quantifies a person's honesty, can we believe the numbers? The basic problem is that the indirect tests allude to a correlation that cannot be absolutely proven.

Academia and companies selling these testing services lead us to believe that these tests are valid. My contention is that the humans are too complex to be able to devise a test that can be valid for making hiring decisions. Heck, we cannot even determine if Vitamin C is good or bad for us.

Nevertheless, using practical tests for hiring makes sense. Indirect testing does not. My experience has been that those tests become a major factor when the intent was to be just an indicator. In contrast, a company can dramatically improve by instituting an active, organized, and structured hiring program. Proper training eliminates the need for indirect testing.