

How to ... use psychometric instruments effectively

By Dr Robert McHenry of OPP[®] Ltd

The Expert

Dr Robert McHenry is founder, chairman and CEO of OPP Limited, experts in applied business psychology. Dr McHenry has worked as a management consultant with major blue chip organisations for over 25 years. His core area of expertise is management development, creating a wide range of personnel selection, performance management and manpower development systems for multinational companies.

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The value of psychometric tests sold to UK organisations annually is over £20m. They are now used in more than 70 of the FTSE 100 companies and most of the public sector. Their use is even more extensive in the USA, and the market in Europe is catching up, as understanding and acceptance of workplace assessment increases.

Psychometric tools were devised in the 1870s to measure individual performance. Modern versions are also used to help businesses select the right people, facilitate individual and team development, and increase organisational effectiveness. Individual tests are among the best predictors of job performance and they are even more powerful when used with other tests or interviews.

With many psychometric instruments available, it is essential to choose and use them correctly.

The different test categories

There are three distinct categories of tests – ability tests, interest inventories and personality questionnaires.

Most ability tests measure an ability and show how someone performs when solving problems. Some try to measure potential (aptitude) rather than current level of knowledge (achievement). Interest inventories are used to help identify the kinds of work someone would be suited to. The Strong Interest Inventory[®], developed by Edward Strong, compares a person's preferred working style, interests and aversions with those of people employed in a wide range of occupations, to determine those the individual is most likely to enjoy.

Personality questionnaires extend knowledge of individual performance further and are extraordinarily powerful in predicting and explaining how someone will typically behave. Probably the best known is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator[®] (MBTI[®]) questionnaire, which is used

worldwide to gain insights into people's behaviour and to understand communication, creativity and attitudes to change.

Choosing an appropriate test

Psychometric instruments are often used for the wrong purpose. This is not only an ineffective use of HR budget, but also unfair to those being assessed. Some instruments should only be used for the *development* of individuals, while others are designed and validated for *selection*. In addition, some tests may discriminate unfairly against minority groups. Others cannot be used outside the country they were developed in without considerable adaptation and validation in the new culture. Choosing appropriate tests is difficult so it is recommended you seek advice from the test publisher if you are unsure.

Ability tests can be used both for selection and career development. In selection they allow an employer to gauge how successful someone is likely to be in certain roles, such as those requiring verbal ability. In career development they show where someone's abilities lie.

Interest inventories are used in career counselling, to inform career decisions, and in career development to stimulate mid-career evaluation and provide an understanding of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. These tests are not recommended for selection, since having interest in an area does not imply ability.

Personality questionnaires help understand how people interact with others and what motivates them. While some tests, such as the 16PF[®] questionnaire, can be used in selection to match characteristics to a role, many, such as the MBTI[®] instrument, are designed solely for individual, team and organisational development, through increasing awareness and understanding of individual behaviour. They were carefully constructed for this and no other purpose.

In recruitment, a range of assessments should be used. For example, ability tests and personality questionnaires could be used alongside other proven assessment methods such as structured interviews.

Use tests fairly and ethically

The British Psychological Society (BPS) has developed guidelines to ensure psychometric instruments are chosen and administered correctly by qualified users. This includes administering tests under controlled conditions to remove unfair advantage and telling candidates in advance which tests they will be taking. Candidates should also be sent preview or practice materials.

It is the test administrator's responsibility to find out about and account for any special needs, which must be done without compromising the validity of the test. If, for example, a candidate has a visual impairment that compromises their ability to do the test, they should be offered an alternative of the same test.

Following testing all candidates should be offered feedback on their performance so they understand their results. Personal feedback is particularly valuable with personality questionnaires where generic written reports can be easily misinterpreted.

Keep abreast of new developments and issues

Today's multi-national organisations need psychometric tests that can be used in a range of countries despite differences in culture. There is also a growing concern that measuring ability by measuring current achievement may be unfair and, importantly, may not assess *potential*. To address this, modern ability tests, such as the ABLE (Aptitude for Business Learning Exercises) Series, attempt to measure the aptitude to learn new competencies by measuring how an individual processes and uses information. The ABLE Series is proven to reduce the potential for discrimination against minority groups. The benefit of such exercises is that no advantage can be gained by pre-test revision.

Finally, there is increasing pressure to make tests and test reports available electronically, although this will never replace paper-and-pencil testing. While this can enable quicker delivery of test reports and tailoring of tests to a competency framework, it is important that such testing and reporting is subject to the same controls as paper-based tests.

Some of the most commonly used psychometric tests are:

Personality Questionnaires

16PF™

MBTI

OPQ®

FIRO-B™

Ability

The ABLE Series

Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal

Raven's Progressive Matrices

GMA

Interest Inventories

Strong Interest Inventory

Self-Directed Search

Common myths:

- Psychometric tests can be faked: ability tests are extremely difficult to fake. With many psychometric tests designed only for development, faking is not an issue. Some of those used in selection can be faked, but there are checks to highlight if this has been attempted.
- Psychometric tests are expensive: while there is an initial outlay in training administrators and test interpreters, running costs are minimal.
- Psychometric tests are not cost-effective: their accuracy in predicting job-performance makes them cost-effective, particularly when compared with the costs of recruiting replacement staff.
- Some people are naturally good at tests and others are not: psychometric tests are not open to any more bias than interviews, where people can be trained in technique. Candidates are best prepared by being relaxed and rested on the day of testing.

Further Information

For further information about OPP and the use of psychometrics, visit www.opp.eu.com or call OPP's Client Support Team on 08708 728727.

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