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## Corporate Matchmaking

### Personality Testing in the Employment Process

Like singles using dating services, many companies try to find their “perfect match” through the use of personality tests and other psychometric testing. It has been estimated that 30% of all companies have incorporated some sort of personality testing into their hiring process.<sup>1</sup> The potential “cultural fit” of a candidate within an organization is a very important consideration, but it is difficult to measure. Personality testing is marketed as a tool that can be used to determine the potential fit of a candidate. Despite the claims of many of the test providers, however, companies should not rely on the results of such tests too heavily. If used, psychometric testing should be one of many tools used to evaluate candidates during the hiring process.

#### Who are you trying to find?

Before integrating psychometric testing into an organization’s hiring process, management should have already developed detailed job descriptions for each open position. These descriptions should specifically address the duties, degree of autonomy and oversight, responsibilities of direct reports and goals and expectations for the position. Then, management should turn its focus to determining the traits of the ideal candidate for the position. Finding the candidate who not only has the right credentials, but also the right personality to excel in the position and flourish in the organization’s corporate culture, should be the goal of any search. Defining the ideal candidate is a critical step in attempting to meet that goal. If the hiring team does not know who they are trying to find, then it should not be a surprise

when the wrong candidate is placed in the position or when the search drags on for months. Neither psychometric testing, interviews, reference checks, outside search consultants, nor any other tools available to the hiring team will make a difference if the search criteria are not clearly defined.

#### Legal Considerations<sup>2</sup>

As with other hiring practices, the use of psychometric testing must not violate the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (the ADA), as recently amended by the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008, or the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA). Most psychometric tests should not cause an issue under Title VII or the ADEA, because unlike cognitive or intelligence tests, there are not “right” or “wrong” answers or scoring. Therefore, the tests are unlikely to have a disparate impact on a protected class. Also, unless there are questions that require the candidate to provide information regarding age, race, color, national origin, gender, or religion, it is unlikely that the test could be shown to intentionally discriminate against a protected class.

The ADA prohibits discrimination based on disabilities or perceived disabilities, including mental disabilities. The ADA prohibits requiring a candidate to undergo a “medical examination” prior to receiving a job offer.

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<sup>1</sup> “The reemergence of personality testing as an employee selection procedure” by Donald L. Caruth and Gail D. Caruth posted to [www.allbusiness.com](http://www.allbusiness.com) on March 1, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The following is not intended as legal advice. If you have specific questions regarding the use of a particular test or other hiring practice, you should consult legal counsel.

In the 2005 case *Karraker v. Rent-A-Center, Inc.*, the Seventh Circuit found that Rent-A-Center violated the ADA by using portions of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) in screening candidates for a management position. The Court ruled that the test was a medical examination, because the questions taken from the MMPI could reveal, or be used to diagnose, certain mental disorders. The EEOC enforcement guidelines on the subject include several factors, such as whether a health care professional either administers the test or interprets its results and whether the test is designed to reveal a physical or mental disability. The EEOC has, however, taken the position that tests designed to measure “only things such as honesty, tastes, and habits” are not medical in nature. So, personality tests designed to illicit information regarding a candidate’s potential leadership abilities and work habits would most likely be permissible under the ADA.

### Choosing a Test

Although there are seemingly an endless number of psychometric tests available in the marketplace, all tests are not created equal. A company should conduct careful research before deciding whether to implement psychometric testing into its hiring process and also in selecting a particular test. The management team should ask test providers about the development and research that went into the creation of the test. If a test provider is unwilling to provide any information, that is probably a good indication of the quality (or lack thereof) of that particular test.

The questions on the test should also be carefully reviewed. Many psychometric tests were not developed for use in a workplace setting. Therefore, those tests will be of little to no value, and some could violate the ADA if they could reveal mental illness. Before giving a particular test to candidates, it should be administered to the existing management team to gain a better understanding of the type of information that will be generated. Also, after a particular test has been implemented into the hiring process, management should periodically evaluate whether the test is providing the type of information sought. Management should also evaluate whether that information has been useful in the hiring process and whether there is a more cost effective method to obtain the same information.

### Not the Sole Factor

Psychometric tests do remove some of the biases that may be present in other portions of the hiring process. Personality tests can provide insight into a candidate’s potential leadership ability and work habits. However, the “results” of a psychometric test should not be weighted too heavily when selecting a candidate for a position. Many industrial psychologists question the validity of the tests in predicting success. Others question whether results are reliable, because test takers may answer the questions in a manner that they think will be viewed most favorably.

Some companies use psychometric tests as screening mechanisms, which is a mistake, because candidates who have the necessary experience and accomplishments might never be considered. Just because a candidate is naturally an introvert or an extrovert does not necessarily mean that she cannot enjoy success in a particular role, nor does it necessarily mean that she will enjoy success. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that psychometric tests attempt to quantify very subjective qualities and traits. Experience and actual accomplishments should not be ignored as predictors of future success. Also, even though interviews are not perfect, sometimes nothing replaces a face to face meeting. Interviews allow the hiring team to get more of “a feel” for a person rather than reading the results of a personality test.

Psychometric tests may not be able to find the “perfect match”, but there is no one method or tool that can. If there were, the hiring process would be easy, and everyone knows that is not the case. Making hiring decisions is still more of an art than a science. If integrated into the hiring process, results from psychometric tests should be one of many factors that are considered. At the end of the process, the decision makers must review all of the information gathered and use their best judgment to select the candidate that they believe will generate the best results for the company.

—Rick Carter

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