

One Last Thing

By Mitch Owens,
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For recruiters, job interviews are a lot like first dates. You meet with someone in a formal setting, and in a relatively short time you try to learn as much as you can about them. What is this person really like? What are their strengths and weaknesses? If you commit to a relationship, will they be there for you over the long haul, or will they let you down in the end? If things go badly, will you wind up in court?

In the dating game, of course, you enjoy several luxuries that simply aren't available to you as a recruiter. In most, but sadly not all cases, the absence of a deadline makes a big difference. Rather than rushing into a commitment, you can learn more about the "candidate" over time, using means other than direct questioning. You can see how they behave in a variety of situations, and how they interact with people other than yourself. You can examine their resume by listening to what they reveal about their past relationships.

Ideally, you're also able to access a large pool of personal references, by meeting their family and friends. If, for example, they're currently in litigation against their parents, or if all their friends have prison tattoos, or if one by one every single person they introduce to you eventually takes you aside to ask if you know about that embarrassing little incident with the San Diego Chicken, you'll know to proceed with caution.

As a recruiter, you also have access to references, and to tools that, perhaps regretfully, you can't use in the dating realm, such as credit and criminal record checks.

Your ability to evaluate a candidate, however, remains somewhat limited by time constraints, and by the fact that they'll quite naturally have their guard up and their charm turned on during the interviews, presenting a version of themselves that may be radically different than the one you'd see in more relaxed, informal circumstances. An experienced recruiter will of course have the judgment and the instincts to cut through these impediments to a considerable degree, but a bad hire can still slip through. Fortunately, recruiters have available to them another tool, a further line of defense against hiring error: psychometric testing.

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In psychometric testing, candidates answer a set of questions designed to measure a number of attributes, such as personality traits, areas of interests, motivational levels, and linguistic, spatial and numerical ability. If the test is well designed, the responses will create an accurate, detailed portrait of the candidate

that will tell you a lot of what you need to know about them in order to make an informed hiring decision.

Some examples:

- Do they have the skills and interest level to deal easily with the administrative aspects of the position, or will such tasks be a burden to them, nothing more than a difficult and unwelcome chore? Will they procrastinate over their paperwork?
- Are they a team player, or do they prefer to work alone? Will they get along with the rest of the team?
- In order to perform at their best, do they need to have everything clearly defined and nailed down, or do they work better in a less structured environment? Will they be able to deviate from established procedure if that's what the situation demands?
- Do they require regular feedback and encouragement, or are they primarily self-motivating? How much individual consultation and coaching will they need?
- Are they easily distracted, or extremely focused? Are they maybe just a little bit *too* focused?
- Will sudden changes and urgent demands throw them, or are these exactly the stresses under which they'll thrive? Under pressure, will they advance or retreat?
- Do they generally take a deliberate, reasoned approach to challenges, or react intuitively? Is their intuition reliable?
- Will they accept criticism and advice objectively, or take it personally? Will they view a setback as a challenge, or as a defeat?
- If they lack variety in what they're doing, will they get bored easily? How will this boredom affect their performance?
- Are they generally positive and optimistic, or inclined to look at the negative side of things? How will their presence impact overall morale?

But what use is a portrait if you don't know what you're looking for, if you can't compare it with other pictures to see where there's a resemblance? This is where benchmarking comes in.

Through benchmarking, a psychometric assessment system can determine which attributes and abilities are most suitable to a given position, by creating a composite from the responses of several people who have already proven themselves in similar positions. You'll know which qualities are critically important and which are of lesser significance, and you'll be able to assess the candidate's suitability in

reference to what's already been shown to work. You'll know what you're looking for, and whether or not you've found it.

Another advantage of psychometric testing is that it's consistent and objective. Even the best recruiters have bad days and moments of distraction, and as fair and open-minded as we might believe ourselves to be, the truth is that we all have biases of which we're not even aware.

Additionally, subconscious verbal clues and body language can play a big part in an interview, impairing the evaluation process. With psychometric testing, however, all of this is out of the picture. When completing the questionnaire by hand or keyboard, the candidate is alone with the test, which asks every candidate the same questions in the same way, without providing them with any indication of how it might prefer these questions to be answered.

Furthermore, a properly designed assessment system will evaluate the questionnaire results according to exactly the same standards for all candidates regardless of their age, race, gender, cultural background or hairstyle. And while this may be stating the obvious, an assessment system will never show up for work preoccupied by the argument it had with another system over breakfast.

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But what about cheating? If a candidate isn't above misrepresenting themselves in an interview, what's to stop them from doing so on a psychometric test? What's to stop an honest candidate from unintentionally skewing their responses toward what they believe makes them look best?

There are at least two answers here. The first is the assessment questions themselves.

Obviously cheating isn't possible on the linguistic, spatial and numerical portion of the assessment, unless during the test the candidate somehow manages to contact someone with a superior number sense or greater aptitude for word puzzles. In a quality questionnaire, the personality and attitude section will be cheat-proof as well, but for other reasons.

The basic issue here is the nature, number and format of the questions asked. A candidate given several minutes to answer a single question in a free-form fashion may be able to paint an inaccurately rosy picture of their talents and tendencies, or at least somewhat obscure their perceived deficiencies through misdirection or prolixity, but these options aren't available when they have to answer several questions within a set time, using a yes-or-no format or a three-point scale.

Furthermore, the potential for skewing, conscious or otherwise, will diminish in direct relation to the number of questions asked, and to the variety of angles from which these questions approach the central issues. If, for example, the assessment asks several questions regarding pro-activity, but keeps shifting between such value-laden terms as assertiveness and aggression, under the properly-administered time constraints of the test it will be extremely difficult indeed for a candidate to present a deceptive but consistent pattern of response; they won't be able to present some grand master-narrative about their suitability as an employee.

The second answer is the way in which the candidate's responses are analyzed. In the *Prevue Assessment System* used by People First Solutions, for example, responses are examined not only in reference to pre-determined benchmarks, but also in relation to each other. The purpose here is to assess the validity of the candidate's answers by comparing their response patterns to established statistical norms.

Unusual consistencies, high levels of contradiction, and an over-reliance on neutral response options may, depending on the specifics, point to an effort on the part of the candidate to mislead, or to other issues that may need to be taken into account when considering the relative value of the assessment. The Prevue System offers a "validity commentary" to assist the recruiter in determining how much weight they should give the test results.

Obviously, a recruiter shouldn't rely exclusively on psychometrics; Prevue recommends that their assessments should account for no more than one-third of the decision-making process. But if the tool is there, why not use it?

For more information about the Prevue Assessment System, go to <http://www.prevuesystem.com/Content/Products/index.asp>

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