

WHITE PAPER

Responsible Employment Testing Pays Off

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Few people would consider shopping for a remedy before knowing they had a medical problem. In a similar fashion, *we typically don't purchase a tool and later look for a place to use it*. The logic seems sound; however, you would be surprised at the number of well-intentioned companies falling into this trap when considering employment tests. I cannot count the number of times managers have approached me for advice on implementing an employment test they've already purchased. My first round of questions is always, "What do you want to 'fix' with this test?" "Where are your current employees falling short in helping you to achieve your business objectives?" "Is testing what you need?"

The use of psychological tests in HR decisions is at its highest level since the 1960's in the United States. This trend is growing throughout the globe. Along with an eagerness by companies to embrace testing programs, we are witnessing the expected proliferation of test vendors ready to sell their products. The president of one of the world's largest and most respected assessment companies recently commented, "For every well-developed employment test, there are 100 others that have questionable value." While this may not be a precise figure, the message is important. As an example, graphology, or the practice of interpreting a person's handwriting to describe their personality and subsequent job success, is widely accepted in France. It is not considered acceptable in most other countries and is likely to result in expensive litigation in the U.S. There is insufficient research to support such an approach to predicting worker success. **"BUYER BEWARE"** is the rule of thumb all companies should

use when dealing with zealous test marketers.

Expatriate selection and assignment becomes a tricky proposition when considering the employment and labor laws of different countries around the world. To make matters more complicated, parent companies will almost always have an obligation to extend the employment laws of their country to expatriate employees. The U.S. has a number of strongly enforced anti-discrimination laws that limit the way organizations can use testing programs for HR decisions. The most noted of these are the 1964 and 1991 Civil Rights Acts, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). In addition, many individual states have established "Right to Privacy" laws.

A valuable "rule of thumb" is to ensure all tests measure important requirements of the job being filled. This assures (but does not guarantee) your company is using selection practices that fall within legal requirements. In most cases, employment laws are consistent with good business practice. I can't conceive of a good business leader purposely using an employment test that measures something other than what is needed on the job. My point is, you can't assume you are using the proper test without "doing your homework." You need to check into the validity of the test for your specific application. Also, be prepared to deal with the fallout of testing programs. We know

from the accumulation of testing research, racial or ethnic groups score differently on general mental abilities tests. Also, females tend to score, on average, slightly lower on arithmetic tests



and spatial orientation tasks. Each of these patterns may be interpreted as race or gender discrimination endorsed by your organization.

How can you know if a test measures important job requirements? First you need to understand which personal characteristics are required for an employee to be successful in your organization. More than 30 years of accumulated research in the field of employment testing has painted a fairly clear picture for us. Unfortunately, most companies have been looking in the wrong direction.

When thinking of job requirements and the personal characteristics an employee must possess, picture a table with trophies sitting atop. The trophies are similar to those we receive from accomplishing feats in sports, such as being the first to finish a 100-meter race. In business settings, the trophies represent training or educational programs successfully completed. They also represent experience in professional and technical areas. Most companies place a great deal of emphasis on these trophies when making HR decisions. The most successful sales associate is often the first to be considered for the next management position. Too little consideration is given to the fact that managing sales projects and managing people require very different skill sets.

Companies need to look beyond the trophies. The table across represents the foundation for success ACROSS job assignments. The table represents personal and enduring characteristics of an individual. Personnel Decisions International, Inc. refers to these as “dimensions” or “competencies.” Hay-McBer prefers the term “competencies,” and the Gallop Organization speaks of them as “talents.” I often refer to them as long-term “success factors.” ***At the most basic level, there are three success***

factors: 1) Mental Abilities, 2) Interpersonal Skills and 3) Motivation, Interests, & Values. Successful people have the ability to learn, to get along well with others and are driven to be successful by their own interests and values. By using professionally developed tests that focus on these three broadly defined areas, your organization will have taken an important step toward addressing the need to for job-related testing.

My final comments must address the complex challenge of assessing candidates for foreign assignments – especially those originating from countries where a person’s right to privacy is highly protected. A high degree of success in foreign assignments depends on relationships within the immediate family. Too much is at stake to relocate a highly valued employee and their family to another country only to find personal and familial issues are in conflict. There is a strong need to assess the entire family’s readiness for the assignment. At the same time, some governments forbid intrusion into the personal life of candidates. One approach that has dealt well with this challenge requires a candidate and their family to complete a self-assessment on their readiness to take a foreign assignment. Selection Research International, Inc. provides a systematic tool for this, called the ***Foreign Assignment Exercise***. This approach has the benefit of reducing legal concerns around privacy issues and also provides the candidate and his or her family with a realistic preview of what they can expect if the assignment is offered.

There is no question that the responsible use of professionally developed employment tests improves the quality of HR decisions. Approaching the situation with the knowledge that the “**Buyer (must) Beware,**” is the first step to making employment tests work for you.