



Test conditions

Wendy Lyons explains how to avoid the pitfalls of ability testing.

“Psychometric tests can all too easily fall victim to various types of bias and discrimination.”

Organisations wanting to evaluate applicants for important jobs are making more and more use of multiple-choice ability tests as a powerful screening and selection tool.

These tests are also known, more formally, as psychometric tests, because they quite literally seek to measure certain psychological qualities in an objective way.

One of the many big pluses of the tests is that they are equally adept at evaluating a handful of candidates or many hundreds of them. Another big advantage is that the tests can very easily be delivered over the internet.

Academic research by psychologists, as well as practical experience among organisations of finding suitable and appropriately talented recruits, indicates that well-constructed ability tests are highly effective predictors of the quality of performance in a particular job.

The questions in the tests usually involve a certain amount of text or data followed by multiple-choice answers.

While these tests can be highly effective as a way of identifying candidates' ability in certain desired areas, it's important to ensure they provide a reliable, accurate and entirely fair way of evaluating candidates.

In particular, avoid using tests that are biased in some way, or which discriminate against the very candidates who, if recruited, could bring your organisation significant success.

By their very nature, these multiple-choice tests do not give the candidate a chance to communicate what he or she is really like other than by furnishing answers to the questions. When the test is being used as a screening tool, the candidate will not usually be interviewed until he or she has turned in a sufficiently promising result from the test to reach the next stage.

This is why the test must be fair, reasonable, and entirely devoid of bias or discrimination.

Unfortunately, some tests don't manage to achieve these ideals. In practice, psychometric tests - especially those which have not been carefully designed, trialled and researched - can all too easily fall victim to various types of bias and discrimination.

This can mean you recruit the wrong people, possibly suffer legal action and could even suffer undesirable publicity for what may be perceived as a 'negative culture'

The need for careful attention to accuracy and fairness in assessing people, and for avoiding unfair bias, is especially pressing when a test is being delivered on-line over the internet.

There is a particular danger of bias against people who are not especially adept at

Checking out your ability tests – some important guidance

- o Has the ability test been vetted to ensure it does not contain items that could bias on the grounds of race, gender, disability or age?
- o Does it measure qualities that are essential to the role?
- o Does the test measure what it is supposed to measure? A test to assess the numerical skills of accountants, for example, might lose credibility if all the examples relate to the balancing of a household budget
- o Can the organisation be confident that a high score will predict success in the role?
- o Are you using appropriate norms to interpret test scores?
- o Do you help reduce test anxiety amongst your applicants e.g. practice questions/comprehensive instructions?
- o What kind of feedback do you offer applicants?
- o Are the on-line versions of the ability tests proven to be equivalent to their paper and pencil counterparts?
- o Are the on-line versions of the ability tests designed to ensure that all respondents have an equal and fair 'crack at the whip'?
- o Have you considered any potential bias in how the test is administered on-line and the impact of this?
- o Have you considered the possibility of cheating and collusion and how these can be tackled?



using computers and/or the internet, but who may have useful skills.

Other forms of discrimination include linguistic bias and stereotyping. Linguistic bias means bias deriving from some aspect of the candidate's linguistic capability that is irrelevant to the test. The test may be worded so that it inadvertently requires a highly colloquial knowledge of English that might in effect rule out any candidates who are not native speakers.

Stereotyping of national or racial characteristics must be strenuously avoided. Yet these are particularly common forms of bias, because every question-setter is likely to have his or her own unconscious perceptions of stereotypes, and also his or her own areas of specialist knowledge, and may easily indulge them even if he or she is otherwise trying to be objective.

Most bought-in psychometric tests have been vetted for the kind of potential

discrimination that can so easily occur. All the same, even established psychometric tests can embody problems of bias and discrimination.

In practice, frequently the best solution is to make use of an independent human resources consultancy that can work with you to identify the most appropriate tests that best meet your needs for assessing candidates and ensuring that the very best candidates never slip through your net.

In Short

- 1 Psychometric tests are supposed to measure psychological qualities in an objective way.
- 2 It's important to avoid hidden bias or discrimination.
- 3 A badly constructed test can eliminate the best candidates.
- 4 You could also end up recruiting the wrong people.