

Exaggerated Claims and Other False Optimism About Pre-employment Testing

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Key Points:

- Test predictability is significantly lower in the social sciences
- A 98% forecasting accuracy is such a bold claim that numbers this high are rarely reported in the scientific journals published to demonstrate the effectiveness of selection systems
- The "one test does it all approach" is not effective for public safety hiring
- A multi-step approach will cover as many bases as possible
- Beyond an entry-level test, drug screening, polygraph, background investigation and a comprehensive psychological examination comprise the multi-step approach

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A recent article in one of Chicago's leading newspapers quoted (in part) a psychologist who claims that his testing system is "98 percent accurate in forecasting inappropriate weapon use, chemical dependency, criminal conduct and racially offensive conduct." Can this actually be right? While we are unfamiliar with the testing system in question, such a statement is a powerful, if frankly not an outrageous claim for any kind of psychological testing tool. This is especially true since in the majority of instances test predictability is significantly lower for a number of reasons, to include all of the variability in human behavior that makes forecasting specific outcomes in the social sciences, like psychology and sociology, a lot more difficult than in the hard sciences, such as physics and chemistry.

Of course, anyone involved in testing entry-level applicants for police officer and firefighter positions would like a virtually foolproof system to weed out bad apples and protect the public. No one wants to be responsible for picking the wrong people, in particular, those entrusted with public safety. The chance that candidates would commit wrongdoing – either on or off the job - increases the pressure on municipalities large and small to hire the very best available applicants while preventing the hiring of individuals who might embarrass a community by their bad behavior by being a public safety risk themselves. On the other hand, the notion that one test alone can handle such a challenging and daunting task strikes us as hard to believe. In short, it's not very credible. Besides the ethical issues involved in making exaggerated claims, which are strongly frowned upon by the professional organizations that license and regulate test providers, there are the more practical issues of guarding against questionable promises while getting down to the difficult work of protecting the public from unsuitable officers.

The temptation is obviously quite inviting to entrust a single testing system with the job of weeding out all of the bad applicants who want to wear a badge and carry a weapon. Not only is public safety a key concern, but in today's flagging economic environment with so many municipal governments

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strapped for cash and unable to meet their funding commitments for salaries, services, and legacy costs, if all of public safety testing can be reduced to a single system at a lower price so much the better. In all fairness to the psychologist making the bold claim of "98 percent" effectiveness, we have not seen the validation data that supports his testing process. So, it may be possible he can back-up such a strong statement. But, given the history of psychological testing in all pre-employment settings and situations in both the private and public sectors, claims of this nature are rarely, if ever, reported in the scientific journals that are published to demonstrate the effectiveness of various selection systems. In short, it strikes us as wishful thinking that one test can eliminate any type of candidate with the potential for criminal or unethical behavior.

What is a community to do about the potential for making a bad hire that puts the public in harm's way? The answer to this question mirrors almost everything else in life: you get out of something what you put into it. Shortcuts like using an abbreviated battery of tests, or relying solely on civilian police and fire commissions to identify the potentially rogue officers are not the correct solutions to the problem. As many communities move to accommodate shrinking budget allocations by looking for efficiencies in the selection process, the chances increase that officers will be hired who do not meet the standards of acceptable behavior on or off the job. These are the kind of hard times when those making exaggerated claims for being able to pick people are likely to come forward with their magic formulas and other such assorted wares. As much as we would like to endorse the "one test does it all" approach to effective public safety hiring, we cannot.

The solution to the issue of identifying and weeding out the possible wrongdoers who abuse their authority on or off the job, or break the law by using illegal substances, is to take a careful, multi-step approach that covers as many bases as possible. An entry-level test is just the beginning of the process. Such broad-based tools look at basic skills as they pertain to the job, like reading and writing skills, along with basic common sense, and such important aptitudes as the ability to understand geographical directions. Next, we recommend using drug screening along with polygraphs to determine directly the applicant's past and present behavior with respect to illegal drugs, the abuse of prescription drugs, and any past instances of criminal behavior. The timing of background investigations can either precede the psychological examination or it can follow. From our perspective a background investigation done before the psychological can provide valuable information for the psychologist to probe along with having the results of the polygraph

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examination prior to conducting an in-depth psychological interview.

One of the steps that are often short-circuited in the psychological testing process is the in-depth clinical interview designed to probe applicants about their backgrounds and past behavior, as well as their attitudes on important issues, like domestic violence, drug use, racial prejudices, and working in a paramilitary setting with a strict chain-of-command. We are genuinely shocked by the number of police and fire applicants we evaluate through our firm who tell us that they have been evaluated elsewhere for the very same positions with four to five hours of testing at a psychologist's office, but they only received a 10-minute interview or none at all before they left their appointment. While testing itself is instructive, it is rarely conclusive because of candidates' propensity to distort their answers in such a way as to appear like model citizens and perfect fits for the job. After all, according to government statistics, with as many as five job seekers for every opening, is there any wonder why people would want to put their best foot forward?

Yet, an experienced interviewer who has made a career of assessing the suitability of public safety applicants for this line of work is far better at picking the right people, while screening out the candidates who will likely embarrass their agencies. While certain critics like to refer to such skilled interviewers as possessing a "gut feel" versus having "hard science" behind them, they are clearly mistaken. The proof is in the pudding with years of satisfied clients and accurate assessments that determine which applicants are likely to remain on the job versus those asked to resign or who are fired outright by their agencies.

Interestingly enough, many of these interviewing skills can be taught to commissioners vested with responsibility for making the final hiring decision. Through carefully documented training manuals containing real-life examples of favorable and unfavorable ways to handle routine interview questions posed to public safety applicants, the lay person's skills can be improved in order to augment the accuracy of the entire hiring process.

In the end, there is no substitute for hard work and careful selection. By

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taking the time and the steps needed to process each public safety applicant, municipalities are increasing their chances of a good hire. While no system is foolproof or unfortunately nearly foolproof, cutting corners with a one test fits all approach will eventually do more harm than provide benefit to their users. Despite exaggerated claims existing in any field along with false optimism, we believe that it is our job to inject a dose of reality, as well as offer sound advice for the continued use of best practices to meet the selection and assessment needs of every community hiring those responsible for protecting the public's safety.