Are Tests Conclusive or Instructive?

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Key Points:

- Pre-employment testing is a well-established practice in business & government

- First tests were used to evaluate soldiers at the beginning of WWI

- There are two categories of testing instruments: cognitive/mental ability and personality

- Cognitive tests are ones that have "right" and "wrong" answers

- Personality tests do not have "right" and "wrong" answers, but they do help establish a profile of the candidate

- Raw intelligence alone does not determine success

- Testing is only a part of the pre-employment picture

- Past experience is a strong predictor of success

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The use of pre-employment testing is an established practice in business and industry as well as in government. The tradition dates back almost 100 years to the last century. In particular, at the start of the First World War there was a need to select qualified applicants for different occupational specialties as the United States prepared to enter World War I. The first test, the Army Alpha, was given to a literate population of military recruits. However, with so many new arrivals in the country, English was often a second language and in many immigrant homes it was rarely spoken at all. Furthermore, in many parts of the country functional literacy was still an issue. To test the skill levels of these potential inductees, a non-verbal reasoning test was developed to assist the military effort. This second instrument, the Army Beta, was a tremendous success, and soon after the conclusion of the War to End All Wars, American business and industry was quick to adopt testing as a way of selecting from among large pools of potential job applicants.

Today with the proliferation of the Internet and on-line testing, the practice of using a test as a final selection tool is more prevalent than ever. The key question we pose is to ask whether the results of such testing tools should be seen as definitive and conclusive or merely factored into the hiring decision along with other valuable and instructive sources, like interview findings, reference and background checks, as well as, past experience in similar types of positions.

Before attempting to answer that question, however, it might be a good idea to explore the different kinds of tests that are available to employers in today's marketplace. Very broadly, there are two types of testing primarily used with prospective new hires. First, there are the cognitive or mental ability tests that actually have "right" and "wrong" answers. These tests can be as simple as math and verbal reasoning tests, or they might involve posing questions that assess an applicant's critical thinking and logical reasoning skills. These first kinds of tests cannot be easily faked, since right and wrong answers are involved. However, in the case of unproctored Internet testing (UIT), cheating might occur, especially if the candidate can run to a dictionary or have a calculator handy while taking the test, or better yet, an intelligent spouse or friend sitting beside them at the computer. On the other hand, tests of logical and critical thinking skills are less easily solved with such readily available aids.

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The second type of testing, which is perhaps more widely used than the first, is personality testing. These instruments run the gamut from assessments of a person's social styles and preferences for relating to people and situations to more tailored tools designed to measure a person's leadership potential or his or her aptitude for selling a product to a company's customers. Unlike standard mental ability tests, these instruments do not profess to have "right" or "wrong" answers. They do, however, help establish a profile of the job candidate, which can then be evaluated against a set of criteria the company is using to determine the best fit for their company's culture. Unfortunately, these testing tools are very easily faked. The questions in most instances are highly transparent, and applicants looking to maximize their chances for getting the job can shade their responses accordingly. While a number of these tests include scales to measure "fakeability," they are fairly lenient and only register in the danger zone when there is a gross violation in the truthfulness of the applicant's response tendencies.

Meanwhile, certain people might argue that a mental or cognitive ability test with right and wrong answers deserves more merit as a final arbiter in making a selection decision. Although there is some truth to that conclusion, high or low mental ability scores in and of themselves are probably helpful or instructive, but not necessarily indicative of automatic shoo-ins or deal-breakers. For example, intelligence is a threshold competency in many cases. Having the right amount is certainly helpful, but in behaviorally complex jobs, such as those found in management or sales to say nothing of many specialized staff positions in supply chain, human resources, finance, or IT, raw intelligence alone does not determine success. There is judgment and common sense plus specialized job knowledge gained over many years of experience that should count for much more in making the final hiring decision. In addition, just as too little mental ability can hinder a person's success, so can too much. Regarding the latter instance, while there are obvious cases in medicine, science, engineering, and high finance where more brain power is better, in many instances very bright candidates become easily bored or worse, they think that they know all the answers, thus making it hard for them to function in a team setting. (The latest train wreck on Wall Street also reinforces our questioning of raw brain power versus common sense.)

Therefore, from our perspective, using one and only one test to make a final hiring decision misses the boat. Testing is just part of the pre-employment picture. What a person has done in the past is a much stronger predictor of success. As a result, information about a person's previous experience can be gleaned from reference checks with prior employers. On the other hand, many employers are reluctant to share background references, thus making the employment interview and face-to-face meetings with hiring managers all that much more critical to the final selection process. Through a combination of behaviorally-based interview questions asking the person to

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identity prior experiences where they have demonstrated skills demanded by your organization, hiring managers are in a much better position to make an informed final decision. In fact, even though they are often much maligned in the literature on pre-employment selection, carefully structured and standardized interviews can make a significant impact. Furthermore, if interviewers are able to make use of the findings from testing tools, the probability of making the best choice will be greatly enhanced. In light of our observations, we conclude that tests are generally instructive, but rarely, if ever conclusive. As usual, we'd love to hear from our readers on their thoughts about the matter.

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