

Testing For Success

Learn how testing potential employees can save you a lot of time during the hiring process.

By Carol Hacker



Pre-employment testing can be an important part of the interview process, as long as you are consistent and fair. (Photo courtesy of iStockphoto.com)

There is plenty of discussion among business owners about testing job applicants before they are hired, but is it really all that easy, effective and necessary? Most owners and managers rely on the application or resume, job interview and references in selecting the best people for their openings. The face-to-face interview is still considered the best way to make a sound and defensible hiring decision provided you have a plan, work from a list of prepared questions and do not rely completely on gut feelings.

Should You Test?

Employers who believe everyone must be tested may want to re-think their decision and take some time to evaluate the actual need for testing. Often, there really is not a need, but testing is seen as an absolute answer to uncertainty. When owners and managers do not feel comfortable interviewing and making hiring decisions, it is easy to believe that giving applicants a test will ease the burden of making a choice. What some advocates of testing forget is that tests have limitations. No test could possibly measure everything that is needed to successfully handle the job. Even those tests that are considered the most reliable have margins of error. Pre-employment tests were never meant to be an easy answer to hiring dilemmas; they are intended to supplement the selection process. As you evaluate the need for testing, you will want to consider several factors:

- Is this the only way you can get information regarding the applicant's skills?
- Will the test be a valid predictor of job success?
- Could another selection method work just as well or better?
- Is the financial cost justified in relationship to the information you will obtain?
- Could a skilled interviewer get the same information from interviewing the applicant?

Selecting Pre-employment Tests

If you decide you have a need to test, you need to learn how to select pre-employment tests and determine the risks that are involved. Pre-employment testing can expose employers to negligent hiring claims by ▶

Questions To Ask And Answer Before Testing

- Will you test every applicant?
- Was the test developed on the basis of a job analysis?
- Was testing done on incumbents to test the test?
- Does the test accurately measure job performance?
- Does the test measure major job responsibilities?
- Does the test have an adverse impact on minorities, females, people over 40 or handicapped applicants?
- Is the test site consistent in terms of space, noise, light conditions, temperature, amount of time given to complete the test, test administrator and scoring procedures?
- What percentage of applicants pass?
- What percentage of those who pass are minorities?

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applicants who are rejected. Privacy issues associated with medical exams and drug and alcohol testing are also a potential liability. In addition, some test instruments are looked upon as an invasion of privacy when they cover personality and honesty.

In 1978, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Office of Personnel Management, the Department of Justice and the Department of Labor adopted and published a document entitled Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures, more commonly referred to as Uniform Guidelines. The Uniform Guidelines are designed to provide the framework for determining the proper uses of tests and other selection procedures that are used for any employment decision.

Some owners and managers consider testing the cornerstone of the screening process and argue that testing is the only way to screen out undesirables. The fact is that pre-employment tests can be dangerous in the hands of unqualified people. Those who do not know how to select tests and/or use them properly or who use testing as the sole reason for rejecting applicants may find themselves in a defensive position.

Tests that measure the applicant's knowledge and skill in a specific area such as customer service, accounting, office administration, information technology, etc. are the best indicators of ability to perform the job. Resist the temptation to "develop" your own test to save money. To do so could put you at risk for a lawsuit should applicants you tested not be offered the job and challenge the test instrument you used. The process of test validation is complicated and should be conducted by an expert.

Types Of Tests

Tests range from a simple hands-on computer ability to a specific skill test or even a psychological or personality test. Other tests screen for aptitude, attitude and drug and/or alcohol use. Generally speaking, testing a skill or set of skills is considered acceptable and not in violation of the law, provided the test truly measures or evaluates a skill necessary for the performance of a specific job.

Psychological, attitude or personality tests are usually in a multiple-choice format and are designed to reveal more about personality and/or psyche. Use these tests with extreme caution. For example, a multiple choice aptitude test may be viewed as discriminating against minority or female applicants because it reflects the ability to take a test more than it does actual aptitude for the job. ▶

Red Flags Of Testing

Employers who decide to test do not always think about the problems inherent in tests, whether they are using tests of skills or psychological/attitude tests. Here are five key points to consider before making the decision to test.

1) Some tests do not accurately predict success on the job. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the courts require that pre-employment tests must be valid for the particular job under consideration.

2) Some tests are complicated to interpret. Many tests are developed by psychologists who are experts in the field of developing tests. It is unlikely the average grower has the special skills or training to interpret the results. Incorrectly administering or interpreting tests could bring financial disaster to your business.

3) Some tests are discriminatory. Would you know a biased instrument from one that is appropriate and valid? If you cannot answer a confident "yes" to this question, you should not be using pre-employment tests.

4) Some applicants will play "beat the system." Experts at taking tests and answering questions to their best advantage will try to convince you that they are the perfect choice because they "did well" on the test. However, what some applicants do not realize is that many tests have built-in safeguards against individuals who try to manipulate the test. Carefully selecting the type of test you use gives you the best chance for separating the manipulators from the honest test-takers.

5) Some people are simply lousy test-takers. They become nervous when faced with a pencil, paper and a lot of questions; they fail as a result. This can unnecessarily eliminate a good worker from the next step in the hiring process. Case in point, I would be willing to bet you have people working for you right now who could not pass a pre-employment test if their lives depended on it. Yet, they are excellent employees.

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As mentioned earlier, personality tests are often viewed as an invasion of privacy because they frequently include questions of a personal nature such as sexual preference/practices or religious beliefs.

Psychological tests are tricky because the answers may indicate

a mental disorder. The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) protects job applicants from this type of questioning and potential discrimination.

In the summer of 2005, I conducted an informal survey among business owners regarding the use

of pre-employment tests — who uses them and exactly what tests were being used. I discovered that many owners were reluctant to share information. A few were very open, almost eager to speak with me. Others were “somewhat” willing to talk, and some agreed to

speak anonymously (they did not want their names printed in connection with what they said).

I found that liabilities and threats of potential lawsuits that can arise if an applicant challenges the test or testing procedures creates a concern for many owners and managers. The cost per person tested was also mentioned as a consideration. Some owners saw the costs as minimal when compared to the price of a bad hiring decision. Others said money was a big factor in deciding whether or not to use pre-employment tests. I also learned that small business owners were the least likely to test because of the expense and, in their words, “We don’t know enough about it.”

Test Administration

Many owners/managers who are using tests do not realize how important it is to carefully select a test administrator — a credible person who will be responsible for testing on a consistent basis. This individual must be well informed, articulate and have complete understanding of the test and how to administer it. A legal challenge based upon discrimination during the testing process or use of an invalid instrument could cost your business thousands of dollars. Do not take a chance. Make sure the test administrator is thoroughly trained in what to do, does so consistently and understands the importance of the responsibilities of a test administrator.

Liabilities

Professionally developed tests are based upon scientific principles and have both benefits and liabilities. Pre-employment testing can provide you with information that may be helpful when making a hiring decision. Pre-employment tests can be dangerous if you are not familiar with selecting tests, use them improperly or make them the sole reason for rejecting applicants. To avoid liability you must be able to show that:

- All tests are directly related to the specific position you are filling. For example, do you require a high school diploma in order drive a truck and deliver plants? Or would an applicant have to read above a 10th grade level to satisfactorily serve your customers? Could that person learn the job with an eighth grade reading level? Most likely, he or she could, so you have to ask yourself why are you testing them with a test that requires reading above a 10th grade reading level?

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•Your test questions do not screen out a disproportionately large number of females and minorities. If that happens, the test is considered invalid and not appropriate for use as a pre-employment tool.

•The test does not have an unreasonable level of difficulty. Unnecessarily high standards often exclude qualified applicants who do not have a formal education but who can perform the job with no problem. The many state and federal laws that govern pre-employment testing, along with privacy rights laws and negligence laws, protect the individual's right to equal opportunity without regard to race, color, gender, religion, national origin and physical handicap. More specific information is available from your local Department of Labor.

In conclusion, am I against pre-employment testing? Absolutely not. However, I am against negligent use of an instrument that may unfairly eliminate qualified appli-

cants. Proceed with caution; do not try to figure it out alone. There are plenty of people who can help you. Should you decide to pre-test, never use the results as the sole basis for your decision to hire or not hire. Use the information as only one step in evaluating applicants. The face-to-face interview is still the most effective way to determine whether or not the applicant is the right choice for you and your business. **GPN**

*Carol Hacker is a human resource consultant, seminar leader and author of 13 human resource-related books including **Hiring Top Performers – 350 Great Interview Questions For People Who Need People**. She can be reached by phone at (770) 410-0517.*

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