

## PREDICTING JOB PERFORMANCE - MATTERS OF MEASUREMENT

There are two common criticisms of the use of profiling tools for recruitment. The first is that 'personality' measures are poor predictors of job performance. This criticism still persists in some areas despite the overwhelming body of evidence showing that **well-constructed and validated** profiling tools do reliably predict job performance.

For example, research has demonstrated that behavioural assessment contributes unique information to the prediction of job performance, over and above that offered by methods such as cognitive ability testing and managerial assessment centres (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson & Kabin, 2001; Goffin, Rothstein, & Johnston, 1996).

The second criticism is that job applicants distort ('fake') their scores for reasons of '*social desirability*'. While some 'faking' is devious and intentional, most 'faking' is motivated by a desire to look good "in front of others". This means that, during social interaction, most people behave in ways that are intended to convey a positive impression of themselves. They do this whether reacting to questions in an employment interview or to items on a profiling inventory.

The belief that candidates can 'fake' the results of profiling tools is probably the single greatest concern employers have about using such tools during the recruitment process. These concerns are understandable. Job applicants are motivated to 'pass the test' and come closer to a job offer. This should not come as a surprise to anyone.

However, most applicants do not know precisely which characteristics are desirable for the position, and respondents who intentionally distort their responses can end up pushing themselves outside of the desirable range for the role. The best policy for respondents is to respond honestly, and most good measures clearly indicate this in the instrument's instructions.

Even so, for those who continue to distort their responses, good instruments have a built in 'faking' scale or response distortion scale (SD scale). Typically, these scales identify individuals who respond in a way that is designed to make them look very favourable. Response distortion scales can help users determine whether an accurate judgment can be made based on the candidate's responses.

### Psychometric instruments

The aim of personality tests is to acquire an accurate description of an individual's 'personality'. Over the years, popular commercial psychometric instruments have been classified into two main groups: 'normative' and 'ipsative'.

#### Normative instruments

Those known as 'normative' measure a specific personality trait so that it can be compared with established patterns of so-called 'normality' for other people's scores for the same trait. This was designed to enable recruiters and others to compare one candidate's results with

other job applicants, particular groups and/or populations. A normative test is based on a Likert-type scale. For example, a questionnaire might present the candidate with a statement such as: *'I pay close attention to small details'* and then ask him or her to rate the statement on a scale of 1 - 5 (e.g. 1 = *Very accurate* – 5 = *Very inaccurate*) in terms of how accurately that statement reflects how he or she actually behaves.

One obvious problem with such tests is that they can inadvertently influence users to respond according to what they regard as being 'socially desirable'. Social desirability bias refers to the fact that in self-perception reports, people will often respond inaccurately to such tests to present themselves in the best possible light and to help them to achieve their personal objectives, e.g. gain employment. Social desirability bias can take the form of over-stating 'good behaviour' or under-reporting 'bad' or 'undesirable' behaviour. Even though there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to such questionnaires, job applicants are much more likely to want to be seen to possess the personality traits that they consider would be favoured by the potential employer. In other words, the job applicants are likely to be motivated to select 'socially desirable' answers in order to increase their chances of being hired. This is sometimes referred to as 'faking good'. It is very understandable for human beings to want to present themselves to others in the best possible light and that should be borne in mind when using normative self-perception profiling tools.

Clearly, there is a much greater tendency for people to use socially desirable behaviour when in a public setting, such as at work, than there is when in a private setting, such as at home with members of their immediate family.

### **Ipsative instruments**

The social desirability weakness of the normative instruments led' in part, to the development of ipsative instruments that are based on forced choice questions and responses. Instruments constructed with an ipsative approach present users with options that are equal in perceived popularity, so that their choice will not be influenced by social desirability. In this type of questionnaire, candidates are asked to choose from two or more equally positive or negative options. For example, they would be asked to indicate which items are 'most like' them and which are 'least like' them. As a result, by asking a candidate to select one of the two options, the question is more likely to 'force' out the 'true' behavioural preferences of the candidate. Because the candidate cannot make him or herself 'look good' on both the statements, the faking-good tendency is considerably reduced.

The results are typically presented in charts depicting the 'most like' scores as how an individual thinks they should behave, 'least like' scores as the individual's true motivations, and a combined profile that identifies the difference between the most and least results to describe the individual's likely normal - or consistent - behaviour. The selections of 'most' and 'least like' are not measurements of different things; they simply reflect different aspects of self perception. 'Most like' choices are more prone to be influenced by social desirability needs and 'least like' choices less so.

This 'ipsative' versus 'normative' debate has been going on for at least 40 years and many psychometricians are still as entrenched as ever in their opposing views of the two methods. It is easy to understand why so many lay people are bewildered and cynical about the merits of psychometric assessments when it would appear that the 'experts' do not agree on some fundamental issues. Setting aside the debate on the 'ipsative' 'normative' debate, the key issue about assessments is the **output**, not the **input**. In other words, does the instrument do what it is supposed to do?

Many employers today complain that the so-called 'soft skills' are what is missing in their candidates – which is why 'personality' assessment is so important. Having an employee who is a good 'fit' for the job leads to higher productivity and retention, both of which are important in today's difficult economic world and labour market.

When assessing these 'soft skills', professionally developed assessments are much preferred to traditional interview methods. While many recruiters pride themselves on being good judges of character, a recent study published in the Journal of Personnel Psychology reveals that this is often not the case (Barrick, Patton & Haugland, 2000). Using 73 applicants and 12 experienced interviewers, who each had over 10 years' experience, the researchers found that all 12 of the interviewers were unable accurately to identify two of the most important traits associated with performance: being industrious and resilient to stress. These traits are often difficult to assess in an interview and require a professional assessment tool to uncover.

In the end, assessment instruments are about helping to ensure person-job fit. The links between person-job fit and job performance has been well established in recent years. A study by The College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, in 2011 concluded:

*"There is a significant positive relationship between person-job fit and job performance ( $r = 0.478, p < 0.01$ ). Thus the findings of this study suggested that when fit exists between employees and the job that they are doing, they tend to exert more effort in carrying out their duties which may lead to greater job performance".*

So, what can **PRISM Talent Finder** contribute to this issue? **PRISM** does not take sides in the debate between the relative merits of 'ipsative' and 'normative' instrument: it provides outputs based on both measurements. Should users require it, **PRISM 'Talent Finder'** can combine both outputs to provide a 'nipsative' output. To minimise the potential negative impact of 'social desirability', it contains an SD distortion scale to determine whether an accurate judgment can be made based on the candidate's responses. It enables organisations to create job benchmarks based on an analysis of those employees who deliver performance excellence in their role, as well as identifying the characteristics of those employees who under-perform in the same role. In other words it measures individuals against benchmarks created from real, measurable performance factors, not subjective profiles.

**PRISM Talent Finder** focuses on behavioural preferences rather than personality. The reason for this is succinctly summarised by Professor Robin Stuart-Kotze, the eminent organisational psychologist who has held Professorships or Visiting Professorships at a number of universities around the world, including Warwick, Aston and Oxford in the United Kingdom.

*"It's what you do (behaviour) that determines your performance, not what you are (personality). It is absolutely critical not to confuse behaviour with personality. To repeat: personality is what you are; behaviour is what you do, and it's what you do that makes a difference.*

*However, most people believe that personality determines how individuals act, and it's very difficult to shake that belief."*

*A critical difference between behaviour and personality is that a person's personality is essentially fixed at an early age and after that it changes relatively little. But although people cannot easily change their personality, they can change what they do. The major determinant of performance is behaviour. Personality gets the headlines because people would like to find a secret key to success that does not require work and effort. Hence the popularity of 'personality tests' ..... Make no mistake: there is a specific set of behaviours that will produce optimal performance in every job. All that is needed is a mechanism that will enable organisations to identify that set of behaviours."*

Another reason why some 'personality' tests are less than ideal for recruitment purposes is highlighted in a report, *The Use of Personality Tests as a Hiring Tool*, by Professor Susan Stabile at St John's University, Minneapolis:

*"Some of the most widely used tests for screening job applicants were not developed for that purpose. For example, the popular Myers-Briggs test was developed not for hiring, but for use in training and development. Additionally, the widely used MMP1 was developed for clinical psychologists to test for personality disorders. This makes their application to the workplace questionable. One reason to question the application of these tests is provided by evidence suggesting that job performance is situationally specific; that is, an employee's environment plays a significant role in influencing the employee's behaviour. This suggests that the assumption underlying the use of personality testing of job applicants-that personality tendencies are transferable from one environment to another - is simply incorrect."*

One of the key principles behind **PRISM 'Talent Finder'** is that the consistent and characteristic behavioural profile pattern of high performers helps to serve as a benchmark against which future applicants for the same role can be filtered. The logic being that applicants who score the same as high performers have something in common which indicates that they, too, are likely to have what it takes to be a high performer.

Although **PRISM** is designed to analyse and identify the key characteristics that make these individuals into 'stars', it also analyses those individuals who under-perform and highlights the characteristics separate them from the 'star' performers.

In many cases, poor performance is not simply the opposite of good or excellent performance. By hiring individuals based only on what high performers do, organisations may end up failing to account for some of the factors that lead to low performance. Time needs to be spent identifying and understanding the key elements that comprise job performance excellence

and on creating a specific, accurate job benchmark against which to measure the relevant factors in a systematic way. **PRISM** is just one of a number of measures that can help recruiters to make better-informed hiring choices, but it should not be used in the absence of supporting measures such as interviewing, CV screening etc.

## References

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