



Do Personality Tests Yield Results?

Advancements in behavioral science have spawned a market of personality tests promising to improve employee management. But not all assessments are created equal.

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On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I. Largely considered the first modern war, World War I was the impetus for advances in science and technology — both on and off the battlefield. One of those advances was the development of what is commonly cited as the first personality test: the “Woodworth Personal Data Sheet,” designed to determine which Army recruits were best fit for battle.

Now, nearly a century later, hundreds of personality assessments have been developed for the purpose of determining which job applicants are best fit for corporate jobs.

“These tests allow you to be more precise in measuring fit for an individual and the job that they do,” said Pierce Howard, research and development manager at the Center for Applied Cognitive Studies. “When you look at the demands of the job, do they correlate with the resources the individual brings to the job?”

Howard is a proponent of the “five-factor model,” a series of five personality traits rated on a spectrum. Commonly known as NEOAC — Neuroticism, Extroversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness — the model is the result of decades of scientific research tracing back to the work of British psychologist and sociologist Sir Francis Galton in the late 1880s.

But the same cannot be said about every personality test.

“Unfortunately, changing fads and fashions in the world of HR often lead organizations to use tools that are packaged and marketed well, and sometimes these tools haven’t been developed according to professional standards, limiting their usefulness,” said Stephan Dilchert, an associate professor of management at Baruch College in New York.

With the market flooded with behavioral assessments claiming to help human resources personnel better hire and manage employees, the range of offerings can sometimes resemble a three-ring circus, writes Kevin Wilde, former chief learning officer at General Mills Inc., in a July *Talent Management* column.

“We need to become educated a bit on the world of assessment and the tests of validity and reliability,” Wilde wrote. “We as talent executives need to differentiate marketing claims from proven science by asking for the proof.”

This proof often comes in the form of years of research and testing. For example, Korn Ferry Institute’s behavioral assessment — the “Korn Ferry Four Dimensions of Leadership and Talent,” or KF4D — was developed as the result of 2.5 million data points, collected from the assessment of 8.5 million individuals over the past 30 years.

“The constructs that we measure for KF4D are not brand-new constructs that we made up and they’re not something that we just discovered yesterday,” said Evelyn Orr, senior director at the institute. “We are standing on the shoulders of the entire discipline of psychology and measurement psychology.”

The KF4D combines existing research in the field of personality assessments, boiling the areas of measurement down into four key components: competencies, experiences, traits and drivers. Competencies and experiences describe what a person does, while traits and drivers define who they are. Together, all four dimensions can show the type of work an individual is best suited for.

“It’s taking the guesswork out of talent acquisition,” Orr said. “With our ability to take in the requirements of the job and the context of the company culture, we’re able to zero in

on the fit section and help companies make better decisions about who to hire and who to promote and how to develop people.”

Hogan Assessments, a provider of psychological tests with mostly *Fortune* 100 clients, makes a comparable promise, backed up by similar evidence.

“We’ve profiled close to 6 million managers,” said Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, CEO of Hogan Assessment Systems. “The more people you profile, the more intelligent your algorithms, your questions, your tests actually become, because you have collected knowledge about people to make more accurate inferences.”

Chamorro-Premuzic said Hogan Assessments provides the scientific community with free access to its research and tools, so researchers can continue to explore personality traits and competencies and how they relate to work performance. Additionally, the company also regularly tests its tools within real workplace settings to further determine what differentiates top performers.

“Personality explains why people do what they do — for example, why managers that are more altruistic will build more engaging teams; why managers who are more creative will spur innovation and so forth,” Chamorro-Premuzic said. “So it really describes what people are likely to do but it also explains what their nature is, and that’s very useful if you’re trying to develop or coach or improve people.”

Both Korn Ferry’s and Hogan Assessment’s methods have been proven to work. Orr and Chamorro-Premuzic each spoke of benefits including greater employee retention and increased objectivity in management decisions.

In fact, when deployed correctly, personality assessments can be incredibly helpful and effective in the workplace, said Deniz Ones, a professor of industrial psychology at the University of Minnesota.

“Using personality assessments, organizations can glean information on individuals’ work-related tendencies, attitudes and work-styles,” Ones said. “Results from these

tools can be tremendously helpful in identifying high-performers, and can also benefit employees when used in career counseling or development and coaching.”

Furthermore, Ones said behavioral assessments can help employers avoid “deviant” behaviors, such as theft, harassment or violence on the job.

Of course, these benefits cannot be conferred by any old BuzzFeed-like quiz. Ones recommends employers verify that assessments they use are in alignment with the professional guidelines for psychological assessments, such as those set by the American Psychological Association, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the International Test Commission.

Organizations without in-house expertise to evaluate these tools can turn to professional consultants who can ensure assessments were developed in accordance with, and continue to abide by, industry standards.

Another means of measuring the potential effectiveness of an assessment is simply to test it, said Linnea Meyer Gandhi, a consultant at TGG Group, a consulting firm that specializes in behavioral insights.

“The only way to really know is to test, because every context is different,” Gandhi said. “All of these really cool behavioral science ideas come from lab studies, things that academics did in a very controlled environment. So we have to be very careful as practitioners that we test in the context that we’re applying in before rolling something out more broadly. Because you might find something that worked in the lab doesn’t actually work in the messier context of real life.”

But when organizations are able to find assessments that do work in the context of their business, experts say they’re likely to reap rewards.

“The goal of work psychology is to optimize human potential in the workplace,” Ones said. “Personality assessments can help identify and manage an organization’s greatest assets from turning into one of its greatest liabilities.”