Personality Tests: A Tool for Predicting High Performing Employees

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The efficient functioning of any public agency is largely dependent upon the employees that comprise that agency. For this reason, public agencies should not only be mindful of, but critically evaluate the methods they use to make selection decisions. Most public agencies use some form of a cognitive or job knowledge test to select employees. In a survey of public agencies’ selection practices conducted by CPS Human Resource Services (CPS) in 2010, 87.3% of respondents indicated that they currently use cognitive ability or job knowledge tests in their selection processes. This is good news, as it has been well documented by research that cognitive and job knowledge tests are two of the best predictors of job performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). While cognitive and job knowledge tests are proven predictors of job performance, they are not the only effective predictors of job performance available to public agencies.

Cognitive Tests Don’t Tell the Whole Story

Every job requires that workers possess certain competencies (i.e., demonstrated knowledge, skills, or abilities [Shippmann et al., 2000]) in order to effectively and efficiently carry out the tasks of that job. Administering a cognitive test to a potential employee is a way of assessing if that person possesses important competencies required for a particular job. Competencies can and do vary depending on the job, but it has been proposed that every competency required by any job can be organized under the following four domains: (1) intrapersonal skills; (2) interpersonal skills; (3) technical skills; and (4) leadership skills (Warrenfeltz, 1995).

- **Intrapersonal skills:** Concern self-esteem and self-control
- **Interpersonal skills:** Effectiveness at building and sustaining relationships
- **Technical skills:** Proficiency at comparing, compiling, computing, analyzing, coordinating, innovating, synthesizing, etc.
- **Leadership skills:** Skills related to building and maintaining effective teams

Cognitive tests are most aptly suited for assessing the technical skills domain (Hogan, Davies, & Hogan, 2007). Relying on a cognitive test as the principal selection tool however leaves three of the four domains largely untapped. The intrapersonal, interpersonal, and leadership domains are primarily made up of non cognitive competencies that are more appropriately assessed using a measure of personality. The CPS selection practices survey found that the majority of public agencies use cognitive or job knowledge tests, but found that only 39.8% of responding agencies use tests (e.g., personality tests, biodata instruments) designed specifically to assess non cognitive competencies. An important question that emerges...
from these results is, how are public agencies assessing non cognitive competencies (i.e., personality) that are important job performance predictors of potential employees? In practice, most agencies rely on interviews to assess these competencies (Hogan & Kaiser, 2010). The problem with assessing personality in an interview is that job candidates are typically rated on internally developed rating scales that tend to be subjective and intuitive. Research has shown that despite people’s beliefs, they are not typically effective judges of talent when it comes to evaluating potential employees (Highhouse, 2008). In fact, the use of intuitive judgment to rate job candidates may actually decrease the likelihood that the best job candidate is selected (Sarbin, 1943). Given the problems of intuitive judgment, this evaluation is best accomplished, and more reliably so, through the use of an established measure of personality.

WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

Robert Hogan (2007) explains that there are two ways in which the term personality is used and interpreted; (1) identity and (2) reputation. Identity refers to the “you” that you know – the way that you see yourself. Your identity includes your values, how you find meaning, your aspirations, dreams, and fears. Reputation refers to the “you” that other people know – the way that other people see you. It includes how other people perceive you based on your past performances or history. It is important to distinguish between these two definitions of personality because they are used for very different purposes. Identity explains what drives an individual’s behavior or in other words, why you do what you do. Reputation is useful for predicting future performance based on past performance.

When it comes to measuring personality in a job selection context, it is reputation and not identity that is of primary concern (Hogan, 2007). Like the old adage says, “the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.” Identity is not as useful when making selection decisions because what matters most is what you have actually done in the past and what you will do in the future, rather than what you perceive yourself as being able to do. Today’s reality television shows are cast full of individuals who identify themselves as great singers, dancers, athletes, etc. The reality is that their reputation (i.e., past and current behaviors observed by others) often prove otherwise.

As a result, most of the personality measures available are designed to assess reputation and not identity. The most common model that is currently used for assessing reputation is known as the Five-Factor Model. The five factors in this model include: (1) Emotional Stability, (2) Extraversion/Surgency, (3) Agreeableness, (4) Conscientiousness, and (5) Openness to Experience. Below is a short explanation of each factor as provided by John, Naumann, and Soto (2008).

**Emotional Stability:** Contrasts emotional stability and even-temperedness with negative emotionality, such as feeling anxious, nervous, sad, and tense.
Extraversion/Surgency: Implies an energetic approach toward the social and material world and includes traits such as sociability, activity, assertiveness, and positive emotionality

Agreeableness: Contrasts a frank and sincere orientation towards others with antagonism and includes traits such as altruism, sympathy, concern for others, trust, and modesty

Conscientiousness: Describes socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task- and goal-directed behavior, such as thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, and planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks

Openness to Experience: Describes the breadth, depth, originality, and complexity of an individual’s mental and experimental life

The Five-Factor Model has proven to hold true across cultures and languages and it provides a common definition of personality that can be used by public agencies to select new employees.

**Personality Tests and Employee Selection**

The goal of any personnel selection test is to improve the likelihood that an agency will select the best employees for a particular job. In other words, agencies want their selection tests to help them predict with greater accuracy which job candidates will be successful if hired. Research in the field of personnel selection has provided us with estimates about the ability of different types of tests to predict job performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). For example, a public agency that uses a test of conscientiousness (one of the factors in the Five-Factor Model of personality) as the only tool to select people for a job, is likely to have a 60% chance of hiring a good performer (Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982). If that same public agency uses a test of cognitive ability along with a test of conscientiousness, the odds of hiring a good performer are likely to increase to 80%. Being able to select high performing employees 80% of the time can result in substantial cost savings (e.g., lower turnover, lower absenteeism, reduced recruitment and selection costs) and increased productivity for public agencies. Some additional benefits of adding a personality test to the selection process are:

1. Provides a standardized and accurate method for assessing personality as opposed to intuitive and subjective methods (e.g., hiring interview) (Hogan & Kaiser, 2010)
2. A more holistic assessment of the job applicant beyond cognitive ability (Hogan, Davies, & Hogan, 2007)
3. Generally personality tests result in no adverse impact (Oswald & Leaetta, 2010)
**Personality Tests and Employee Development**

Personality tests can not only be used to select new employees, but they can also be used to provide feedback and development plans to existing employees (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010). Personality tests make people aware of certain behaviors and tendencies that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, and this self-awareness is the key to development (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003). In order to develop (i.e., change behavior), employees need to be aware of how they are perceived by others and which behaviors they engage in that impede better job performance (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010). For example, the results of a manager’s personality test may indicate an extremely high score on the factor of Agreeableness in the Five-Factor Model. This manager is likely to show genuine concern for others, be sympathetic, and have altruistic tendencies. These behaviors and tendencies may appear to be desirable in any circumstance, but they could possibly impede job performance if this manager needs to discipline an employee that is not performing adequately. Out of genuine concern and sympathy for this employee, the manager may beat around the bush when disciplining the employee or avoid the issue altogether. If the manager is aware of this tendency that impedes job performance, then a development plan can help establish specific strategies and goals to improve in this area.

**Common Criticisms of Personality Testing**

One of the most common criticisms of personality testing is that it is not highly predictive of job performance and therefore should not be used in employee selection (Morgeson et al., 2007). However, research has consistently shown that well constructed personality tests are indeed useful predictors of job performance (Mount & Barrick, 1995; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Ones et al., 2007). The argument for including personality assessment in the selection process in no way reduces the importance of cognitive ability, as cognitive ability is one of the best predictors of job performance. However, by adding a personality test to a selection process that already includes a measure of cognitive ability, an agency significantly improves its chances of selecting high job performers.

A second criticism of personality testing concerns faking. Faking in personality tests occurs when job candidates alter their responses in an attempt to present themselves in a more desirable manner. Critics state that it is relatively easy for candidates to fake in order to improve their scores, which decreases the validity (predictive power) of the test (Donovan, Dwight, & Hurtz, 2003; Murphy & Dziewczynski, 2005; Morgeson et al., 2007). Hogan, Barrett, and Hogan (2007) conducted a study with actual job applicants who were motivated to fake and found that the job applicants were just as likely to decrease their overall score as they were to increase their overall score, leading to the conclusion that trying to improve a score by faking may not be that easy. Proponents of personality testing say that if faking does occur, the research indicates that it does not have an effect on the predictive power of the test (Schmitt & Oswald, 2006).
A third criticism of personality testing regards its use for employee development. Some critics believe that personality tests are not effective tools for helping employees improve job performance. It is true that personality tests by themselves are not effective for employee development. Personality tests create self-awareness, which is the key to development (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003). Research has shown that in order to successfully use this self-awareness for development, a personality test should be accompanied by feedback from a coach who helps set specific development goals and that these development goals should be shared with coworkers (Smither et al., 2004).

**QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN LOOKING TO USE A PERSONALITY TEST FOR EMPLOYEE SELECTION**

If a public agency is considering the use of a personality test in their selection process, there are certain questions that should be answered prior to implementation.

1. What is the personality test designed to do/tell you and does that match up with what your agency needs?
2. Is the personality test supported by a technical manual that includes information on the development and validation of the test?
3. What process will your agency need to follow in order to determine if the personality test is appropriate for your particular job at your particular agency?
4. How are pass points / cutoff scores set?
5. What kind of support will you be provided if you decide to use the test?
6. Has the test ever been legally challenged? If so, what was the outcome?

Obtaining satisfactory answers to all of these questions will help ensure that the personality test you have selected will improve the likelihood that your agency will hire and develop high performing employees.

**THE CPS SOLUTION**

CPS has partnered with Hogan to provide quality personality assessment to public agencies. The Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) was the first test of normal personality based on the Five-Factor Model that was developed specifically for use in business. Some of the features and benefits of the HPI are:

- Based on the Five-Factor Model
- Developed exclusively on working adults
- Normed on more than 150,000 working adults worldwide
- Validated on more than 200 occupations covering all major industries
• No invasive or intrusive items
• Instantaneous scoring and reporting output
• No adverse impact
• Online administration by protected access
• 15 to 20 minute completion time
• Simple and comprehensible items based on a 4th-grade reading level
• Over a million job candidates have been tested with the HPI
• Successfully predicts occupational success in all major job categories

Contact a CPS consultant to learn more about how you can implement the HPI and other Hogan inventories to improve the ability of your agency to hire top performers and develop existing employees.

ABOUT CPS

CPS is a self-supporting public agency providing a full range of human resource services to the public and nonprofit sectors. We have unique expertise in delivering HR management and consulting services, employment testing and assessment services to government agencies throughout North America. We assist organizations across the talent management continuum in recruiting, selecting, developing employees, and providing organizational assessment and development.
REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING MATERIAL


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