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Psychological Testing for the Selection Process

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Psychological Testing for the Selection Process



By Jason Soon

To ensure they get the most qualified and best-fitting candidates, employers sometimes require applicants to go through an elaborate selection process. One of the items in the selection process may be for a written psychological test. This article examines the validity and usefulness of such tests.

THE origins of psychological testing can be traced back to the late 19th century. According to an article “Psychological Testing in Personnel Selection, Part I: A Century of Psychological Testing” in *Public Personnel Management*, much work in the development of scientific psychological

testing occurred through industrial psychologists’ efforts to support the military in the two World Wars. Frederick Taylor, a founding father of the field of scientific management was credited with advancing the adoption of the systematic method of analysing and breaking down work pro-



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Chris Mead says to ensure accuracy, the interpretation of the psychological test should be done by trained professionals.

cesses into subcomponents to maximise productivity and increase efficiency.

When the field of industrial psychology emerged, it moved away from scientific management's mechanistic styles of analysing human productivity. This increased the emphasis on human elements such as intelligence and personality in determining job performance.

During World War II, military psychology was recognised as essential to the nation's war efforts, and the successes of psychological testing were widely documented. Many agencies including the Office of Naval Research were subsequently established to support scientific research. By the 1950s, psychological testing for selection and recruitment purposes had reportedly gained wide acceptance.

The Web sites of psychological assessment tool vendors provide psychometric testing services, and training

providers. Authoritative sources of information on the use of psychometric testing by the human resource profession in Singapore are less easily accessible.

One major study carried out using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI, was conducted by Lim Tock Keng on 1,733 16-year-old Singaporean students in 1994. Another major study was conducted by Vicky Tan and Tan Nghoh Tiong of National University of Singapore, NUS, based on a sample of 786 working professionals and managers' MBTI profiles collected by Singapore Institute of Management, SIM, between 1995 to 1997.

A 2002 study conducted by Jean Philips and Stanley Gully on the perceptions of fairness in the type of selection methods used by employers was reported in *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. In that study, a snowball sample of 158 Singaporean working

adults was used, and it was found that only 5 per cent of the sample reported having been administered a personality test in the process of selection for a job. The study found that Singaporeans, in their judgment of the selection method, placed greater emphasis on face-validity, how widespread the selection method was used, and whether the selection method allowed detection of important qualities that will differentiate the candidate from others. The implications of this study were that organisations, which hope to garner greater acceptance of its selection methods, could do so by clarifying the face validity and job relatedness of its selection methods.

Chris Mead, southeast Asia regional director for Hays Singapore, a recruitment consultancy firm, says: "Certain psychometric testing can be of value in completing the picture of the individual. So the hiring or recruitment cycle for someone should be quite an involved and in-depth process, and psychometric testing can provide a piece of that picture. We wouldn't necessarily say that you should hire or not hire someone purely on the result of psychometric testing, but it does provide a part of the picture about the personality of the individual, and how they may react under certain situations."

Sachiyo Kawasaki, a senior consultant and executive coach at ACT Human and Business Development Pte Ltd, says: "I am more inclined to use strategic interviewing questions in order to identify desirable behaviours required by the position than relying on psychological testing, for my belief is that psychological testing does not adequately forecasts the candidates behaviours. Behavioural questions, especially under stressful or conflicting situations, are more eloquent in forecasting the candidate's future behaviour. If used at all, I would use psychological testing more for the benefit of candidates for their own personal growth."

There is a wide range of psychological assessment tools available in the market. These can be broadly categorised into those that measure ability, aptitude, or personality. From an examination of the literature, it can be surmised that psychological tests are more commonly used by larger organisations than by smaller companies. This is because the costs of training and administering such tests are high and having many candidates evaluated makes

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it more economical for bigger firms, as opposed to the less substantial recruitment size of smaller companies.

Mead says: "In my experience, such tests are widely used in the United Kingdom, Australia, and some parts of Asia. In Singapore, the multinational corporations, MNCs, tend to use psychometric testing. I won't say it is widely used in Singapore but it is starting to gain some recognition for certain positions." Based on his experience, it was rarely used six years ago as part of the recruitment procedure, but has become more common in the last two to three years particularly for senior leadership roles or sales positions. He mentioned that most commonly used psychometric tests in Singapore are the Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Compliance Personality System, DISC, and MBTI.

The MBTI is based on Carl Jung's theory that the human personality can be divided into 16 types. After Katherine Briggs read Jung's 1921 book *Psychological Types*, she and her daughter, Isabel Myers began work on an instrument in the 1940s. They took more than 20 years to develop it, and the first MBTI instrument was published in 1962 by Educational Testing Service, ETS, only for research purposes. In 1975, when Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc, CPP Inc, acquired the publication rights to the instrument, the test became available for use.

MBTI consists of 126 forced choice questions. Based on answers to these questions, the MBTI determines what psychological type the individual belongs to according to four dimensions.

A better understanding of themselves and others, individuals can become better able to adapt to changing demands of the environment and in interactions with colleagues, friends, and family.

The four dimensions are: introversion or extroversion (I or E), sensing or intuitive (S or N), thinking or feeling (T or F), and judging or perceiving (J or P). A person can lean towards only one side of each dimension, and his inclinations on the total of four dimensions will yield a four-letter designator, which describes his personality type. For example, an INTJ will describe an individual who is likely to be an introvert. INTJ prefers using intuition to make sense of the world, exhibits rationality and logic in his decisions, and prefers an orderly mode of life. This personality makes use of the most important data to come to a conclusion, and whereby the ability to plan and control are prized highly.

The MBTI tests for preferences and not aptitude, therefore it cannot be used for selection. It is emphasised by its makers that all types are valuable, and none is more desirable, better, or healthier in any way. According to *MBTI Code of Ethics* by the Center for Applications of Psychological Type, CAPT, the results of the MBTI cannot be used to "label, evaluate, or limit any individual in any way."

DISC was developed by William Moulton Marston, who wrote the book *The Emotions of Normal People* in 1928. In the book, he examined the emotions, and came up with four factors to test his theory of human personality. The four factors were: dominance, influence, steadiness, and compliance, and the initials of these words make up the name DISC. In addition, Walter Clark and Bill Bonnstetter were also credited with refining the assessment tool, and creating the first computerised version of the instrument respectively.

According to the vendors of the instrument, the DISC measures behavioural patterns and personality styles. The reasoning goes that by gaining a better understanding of themselves and others, individuals can become better able to adapt to changing demands of the environment and in interactions with colleagues, friends, and family.

The aim of DISC is to help people achieve success in life by improving their proficiency in the interpersonal relationships realm.

DISC measures individuals according to their preferences in each of the four dimensions. Dominance refers to people who are active and assertive in solving problems and can be described as forceful, aggressive, venturesome, and decisive. Influence refers to individuals who are social and outgoing, and able to convince and persuade others. They can be described by words such as magnetic, inspiring, and political. Steadiness refers to those who are consistent and prefer predictability. They are patient and seek peacefulness. Words such as possessive, deliberate, and relaxed can describe them well. Compliance describes individuals who are more methodical and seek rules, regulation, and structure. Words like careful, systematic, and detail-oriented are used to describe them.

Each of these four factors can be



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Sachiyo Kawasaki believes strategic interviewing questions are better at predicting suitable behaviours for a position.



mapped onto a simple graph of four quadrants, with D and I on the top half, and C and S at the lower half. The top half will represent task orientation while the bottom half indicates people orientation. This allows for a better understanding of where on a scale of behavioural tendencies a group or an individual lies.

Training is required for administering psychometric tests. DISC is commonly used for team-building and career counselling among others. DISC personality assessment can help to build a part of the profile of the individual, and is frequently used for pre-hire screening. The MBTI is a restricted assessment tool which requires special qualifications to administer to others. It has found many applications in the organisational context as well, for example it has been used in career planning, by human resource in team building, to develop leadership, to motivate, in conflict resolution, and in managing others. It had also been applied in the healthcare profession to improve standards of patient care.

Mead says: "I think DISC will give more indications to the actual capability of the individual whereas the MBTI

gives more indications of the behavioural preference. It is a nuance and sometimes people do make hiring decisions on the basis of MBTI scores and they shouldn't really do that. It is important to understand that it is not the be-all, end-all, and you do have to take into account the person's skills and experience."

One reason why employers would make use of psychometric testing is that it is an objective means of selecting candidates. Everyone takes the same test so subjective biases are minimised. It is stated on the Myers and Briggs Foundation Web site: "hundreds of studies over the past 40 years have proven the instrument to be both valid and reliable."

According to Andrew Jenkins, in a 2001 paper entitled "Companies' Use of Psychometric Testing and the Changing Demand for Skills: A Review of the Literature", the predictive validity of cognitive tests had been widely debated, but the research literature points towards they are good predictors of performance across a wide range of jobs. The predictive validity of personality tests had also been called into question, but meta-analytic studies provide some support for their usefulness

in recruitment and selection.

These supportive reviews have their opponents. In a 1993 article in the *Journal of Career Planning and Employment*, David Pittenger, an assistant professor of psychology at Marietta College reviewed the literature examining MBTI, and found it to have significant flaws and weaknesses in statistical structure, reliability, and validity. He concludes: "In many cases, the popularity of the instrument is interpreted as an indication of its accuracy and utility, which then leads to wider use and less inclination to question the foundations of the test. As a consequence, the MBTI has become a popular instrument for reasons unrelated to its reliability and validity."

Kawasaki says: "They are both reliable and valid when used as a tool to understand self. However, neither will give readings on abilities or aptitudes for specific jobs or positions. Human beings are more complex than test scores and can show surprising abilities to grow and meet job requirements."

The question of the validity and reliability impacts on the value and usefulness of psychometric tests in human resource practice. Major ethical concerns have been raised regarding the proper administration and interpretation of test results; this is because an unqualified administrator may do more harm than good.

Mead says: "I think what's important is the people who are receiving the results of these psychometric tests on individuals are appropriately trained in how to interpret them, and not just from a surface level, because if you are then going to make judgments on the individual, based upon your scant knowledge of the tools, then there's a danger of wrongly judging the individual either in a good way (for them if you think they are better than they are) or unfairly (if you think they are not as capable as they are)."

The use of psychometric testing in the selection process has its proponents and detractors. A vast amount of literature says it has some merit, but the evidence supporting its use also tell us that employers cannot rely on them solely in filtering out candidates. It is important that human resource practitioners be well-informed about the strengths and limitations of psychometric tests, and to follow proper procedure when including it in the selection process. ✎