

## Selecting for potential: Improving the outcomes of your selection process

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Forward-thinking employers are keenly aware of the investment required to find the right fit for a particular job. Being well dressed, mannerly, and well spoken are important to many roles, as is meeting the job specifications. Yet determining the underlying abilities and anticipated working styles of a candidate during the selection process is fundamental to successful recruiting.

Despite the well-established effectiveness of both personality and cognitive ability assessments in the HR community, a number of recruiters still prefer to stick with what they know in their selection process – typically the recruitment interview. This can be substantially less effective than psychometric assessment, as well as more costly and time consuming to conduct. Research has demonstrated that recruiting employees based on cognitive ability and personality fit to the job can substantially increase productivity post hire.

Including ability and personality assessments within your selection process will give you results over and above any other combination of approach and will change the face of recruiting as you know it.

### Business case

Recruiters continue to be unsatisfied with the results of unstructured job interviews and poor predictions of job performance. A need for comprehensive, cost-effective, efficient and valid assessments continues to exist for many selection professionals.

Unfortunately, the majority of the marketplace is not educated on the hierarchy of assessment methods in the selection space. This creates an environment where recruiters continue to use what they perceive to be the best of the best, without an awareness of superior existing assessment methods.

Below is a snapshot of two superior assessment methods – ability and personality, what they measure and how the integration of these combined results into selection can substantially improve the outcome of your existing recruiting efforts.

### A better predictor to select for potential

Comprehensive assessment, including both personality questionnaires and ability tests, has a predictive validity over four times higher than an unstructured interview. But what exactly are these two assessments and what are they measuring?

#### *Ability assessments and their role in selection*

When it comes to job performance, general *cognitive ability* has been shown to be the best predictor and is effective for prediction across all different types of jobs. It determines how much the person learns and how fast. It also predicts the person's ability to act in innovative ways in situations that are novel when the person is without exact knowledge of what to do.

This idea of cognitive ability has been around for quite a while: from early days in his career, Raymond B. Cattell, the author of the 16PF® questionnaire, focused on the importance of cognitive ability measures in predicting behaviour. Within cognitive ability or *general intelligence*, which he called 'g', Cattell identified a range of more specific abilities that powerfully affect particular task performance. This range of abilities most fundamentally includes *verbal ability* (speaking and writing), *abstract reasoning ability*, *numerical ability*, and *spatial or perceptual ability*. Each of the four abilities originates from different parts of the brain and enables superior performance in a particular area or type of activity.

Understanding levels of cognitive ability is important for predicting success for all jobs, but the more complex the job, the more cognitive ability can predict performance. This idea builds upon Thorndike's classical learning theory, acknowledging that knowledge is critical for complex performance. That is, if a person has a high cognitive ability, they will be able to learn more complex work tasks, quickly improving their performance.

It is very likely that higher intelligence and ability to learn will also mean that an individual is able to deal with ambiguity better – hence the importance of aligning intelligence to complexity of roles.

#### *Ability assessments and how they work*

Although cognitive ability is often seen and measured as a whole, it can be subdivided into different areas. The different ability areas generally measured are *verbal*, *numerical* and *diagrammatical*. In this sense, cognitive ability can be assessed via ability assessments either by looking at these three specific elements individually, or by combining them into a whole.

Cognitive ability tests typically involve presenting the candidate with a problem to be solved and some options to choose from. In the case of a verbal reasoning test, the candidate might be presented with a passage of text followed by several statements; the candidate's task is to say which of the statements correctly captures the meaning of the passage.

When it comes to understanding the results of cognitive ability assessments, people often confuse tests of *attainment*, *aptitude* and *ability*. These three are closely related, and in reality may be seen to have great overlap, but there are slight differences.

- Tests of *attainment* measure what an individual has learned, ie what knowledge has been attained. A common example of this is school exams.
- *Ability* and *aptitude* tests are more similar to each other in that they measure an individual's potential to learn. The main difference between these latter two tests is that:

- *ability* refers to a skill that can be currently demonstrated
- *aptitude* refers to the potential to learn a new skill.

To see this in practice, consider recruiting for an accountant: an ability might be using a complicated formula to calculate tax; whereas an aptitude might be the underlying skill in reasoning with numbers that would make it easier to learn the formula.

As can be seen from the example above, an aptitude test can predict the likelihood that a person will acquire a skill. As a result, aptitude tests can be used with a wide range of candidates, including people without specific knowledge of a role; this can increase an employer's chance of recruiting a candidate with the best potential, rather than just the best prior knowledge. This makes a great deal of sense in graduate recruitment situations, or when the role in question allows job knowledge to be developed after recruitment.

#### *Building personality assessment into selection*

Cognitive ability is often said to predict the individual's capacity for performance, whereas personality predicts the style that an individual is likely to use as they perform.

Personality is particularly useful to explain, predict and understand the existing work attitudes and organisational behaviours of a potential candidate. Below are just three examples:

- Research has shown that personality can predict job dedication and help in avoiding counterproductive behaviour in an organisation. In this sense, the results of a personality assessment can give an indication of who is most likely to succeed and stay in the job.
- Speaking broadly, research also suggests that workers are most effective when the job requirements match their personality, eg a quiet and reserved person may feel uncomfortable in a sales role that requires networking, presenting to groups and entertaining potential customers. Personality assessments can be designed to focus on certain traits for certain roles, thus becoming a very useful tool in predicting which candidate is best suited for a job.
- Personality information has the added benefit of being useful in employee development, where each individual can benefit from information about their own unique characteristics and how these affect work behaviours – facilitating the development of individual strengths and focusing on the improvement of weak areas.

Personality assessment is key to identifying the suitability of an individual for a role. Traditional recruitment techniques have tended to select on the basis of *eligibility* (eg qualifications and past experience) but have led to people leaving jobs through lack of *suitability* (eg motivation, enjoyment of the role, and fit with the culture). As such personality assessment can lead to better person–job fit, with resulting increased productivity, job satisfaction and tenure.

#### *Personality assessments and how they work*

There is a wide range of personality assessments available on the market today. In general, personality measures focus on traits; these are considered to be relatively firm behaviour and thinking styles possessed by the individual.

Objective personality tests have proven to be very effective in measuring the important but less visible characteristics of personality that are so important to effective job performance. When comprehensive personality data is collected and compared to the requirements of the particular job, each candidate's individual talents and strengths can be recognised and productively harnessed.

Personality questionnaires, for example the 16PF questionnaire, typically measure a variety of different aspects of an individual's character (or traits). For example, four of the sixteen traits of the 16PF questionnaire include: how dominant a person is; how much they like to work collaboratively; how much control they have over their emotions; and what their tolerance is for ambiguity or routine

Below is a question typical of a personality assessment; although it straightforwardly asks about a work preference (therefore having face validity for an occupational use) it is more concerned to find out if a person has a practical (rather than conceptual or theoretical) approach to the world:

*I enjoy routine, constructive work, using an effective piece of machinery or apparatus.*

- true.*
- ?*
- false.*

As can be seen from the example above, a personality assessment will enable you to profile the range of behaviours that an individual is most likely to show in the workplace.

### The interplay between ability and personality of a potential recruit

Combining a candidate's personality information with their cognitive ability information gives us a far greater capacity to predict job performance.

By combining personality tests and ability tests, a recruiter gets a picture of (a) how the person typically behaves (their personality) and (b) what they are capable of doing (their ability). Thus, the information from the tests is additive and, when combined, it gives a clearer and more detailed picture of the whole individual. This is much more measurable than a standard interview and gives greater credibility in the eyes of both employee and employer.

There is also evidence of interplay between cognitive ability and personality traits, where the individual's cognitive ability affects their behaviours, and their personality traits affect how they use their level of cognitive ability. Below are two examples:

- The 16PF trait of Dominance has been found to predict a person's tendency to develop and present their own viewpoints, to persuade and lead others, and to persist

toward goals despite obstacles and set-backs. Curiously, the effectiveness of Dominance as a trait is substantially determined by intelligence level. Therefore, speaking up assertively about one's viewpoint, for example, is not very effective if the viewpoint isn't well thought out or accurate. Similarly, a leader will not be effective in convincing others to follow if their ideas are often found to be misguided or if their projects end in failure.

- Personality traits also often determine the area in which an individual will apply their intelligence. For example, individuals who are high on Warmth and other 16PF Extraversion traits tend to apply their intelligence to areas involving people (eg teacher, social worker, salesperson, manager), while those who are low on these factors tend to apply their intelligence in more objective areas (eg mechanic, computer programmer, researcher, accountant).

#### *Why personality and ability assessments are effective to use together*

The main reason to use ability and personality tools together is that they bring incremental validity by assessing different aspects of a person.

If a recruiter only assesses a candidate's cognitive ability, they will probably select the person with the highest score. However, if they include assessment of the candidate's personality, they gain insight into important (and often hidden) personality factors that will impact on the candidate's performance. For instance, a candidate with high ability scores may have personality traits that are dominant and unreliable, and thus be most likely to use his or her high cognitive ability in ways that will be counterproductive for the company. A recruiter may select this person over someone who might have slightly lower intelligence but is hard-working, has a strong work ethic, and who would likely reach higher goals. This comparison demonstrates the importance of combining personality and cognitive ability in recruiting, because effective selection is not only about how talented someone is, but also how effectively they use their talent.

Personality assessment predicts the style of work performance; ability assessment predicts capacity of work performance. By using these different sources of information together, the picture of the candidate becomes more comprehensive and thus more realistic. This improves the accuracy of prediction of an individual's future job performance and work behaviour in a potential role. By combining measures of personality and cognitive ability, a recruiter can obtain more and higher quality information early on to confirm selection decisions and predict future success of a candidate.

To get the best fit between the person and the job, it is essential to know both the individual's personality traits and their abilities. Getting a comprehensive and objective view of the whole person improves the quality of the selection process, and builds a platform to appreciate a candidate's talents as they develop within the organisation.

#### Interested in learning more?

For more information on selecting for potential using ability and personality, visit [www.opp.eu.com/select](http://www.opp.eu.com/select) or contact OPP's Consultancy Help Desk on 01865 404636.

For technical support for existing OPP products, contact Client support on 0845 603 9958.

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