Sift-out, select-in

The benefits and best practice of online ability testing as part of your selection process

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Using online ability assessments to deliver better selection decisions

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Executive summary

With the increasing availability of technology and inexpensive online tools, companies are relying more and more on efficient methods to complete what used to be time-intensive, business-critical tasks. Recruitment is no exception. Getting the right people in the right positions and retaining them needs to be done effectively, efficiently and with confidence, knowing that they are a good fit for the organisation.

Knowing about time- and cost-effective methods to identify and select the best talent is the first step to keeping up with the competition in the selection space. Understanding the options that are available to you and how to apply them to get the most out of your company's selection process is next – and it's easier than it seems.

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### The traditional vs modern approach to online testing

To embrace the newest technology and online methods in selection, you need to first understand what has existed to date and what has become the norm in the industry. The traditional approach to personnel selection is often referred to as a 'three stage process' consisting of (1) an initial application or application sift stage, (2) an interview that is most often conducted by the manager of the company or department and, finally, (3) an assessment centre. Although the candidates who don't fulfil the qualifications from the initial stage will be sifted out based on their application, there will likely still be a large group left to interview in the second stage before the best candidates can be chosen for the final assessment centre. This approach can be very costly and time-consuming, regardless of the applicant pool size.

Whether graduate recruitment or general selection, the issue around cost and time investment is not foreign to recruiting professionals. There are many recruitment situations where it can be challenging to obtain sufficient information from the initial application stage to confidently determine who should proceed to the more cost-intensive second stage.

This has led to the development of a new and more streamlined selection process, incorporating a savvy online psychometric testing component early on. Similar to the traditional approach, this current approach usually starts with an initial application or sifting stage. However, candidates who fulfil the requirements defined for the job do not proceed to a time- and cost-intensive interview stage. Instead they are asked to complete

an unsupervised online ability assessment. Based on the additional information obtained for each applicant at this stage, unsuitable candidates, ie the test-takers with the lowest scores on the assessment, who would not be able to fulfil the requirements of the job, are sifted out. This approach has the advantage of screening out another layer of poor performers before using more cost-intensive selection methods.

For the final selection stage, the remaining pool of applicants can be invited for an assessment centre, which would include a longer and more detailed supervised ability test, together with an interview and possibly a personality assessment. This combined approach of unsupervised online assessment, followed by a comprehensive assessment enables the practitioner to handle larger groups of candidates in an abbreviated amount of time. It also provides more detailed information earlier on than in the traditional approach.
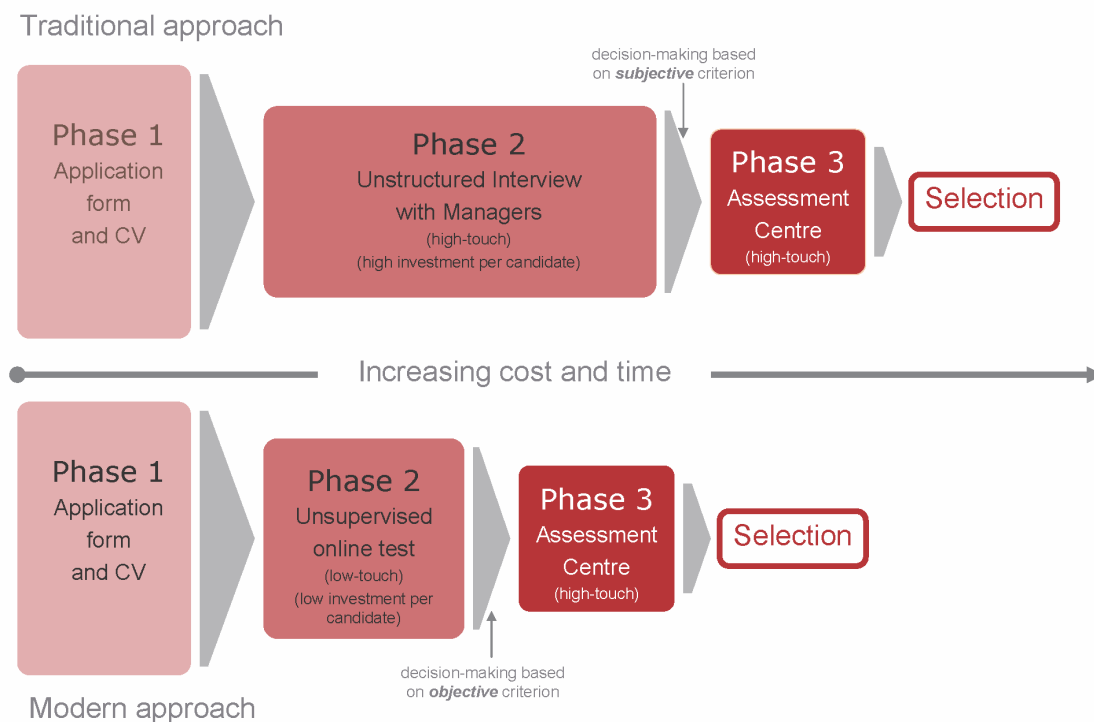
Incorporating the modern approach into the company's recruitment processes might be daunting and the idea of restructuring and establishing new procedures may take some effort and be met with possible resistance; however, when potential benefits are considered and cost savings become apparent, these simple challenges fade in light of the gains that can be made.

Incorporating the new approach into the selection process

Selection methods, in general terms, are divided into a continuum from **low-touch approaches**, which involve little human interaction and fairly low expense, to **high-touch approaches**, which involve significant human interaction and high expense. The modern approach discussed above starts with a low-touch assessment and progressively moves to high-touch assessments with a smaller number of more promising applicants left. This has proven to be the most effective process in selection as unsuitable candidates can be sifted out at an early stage and only the more promising candidates proceed to the more cost-intensive stage, saving the organisation significant amounts of time and money.

Once you understand the modern approach to selection as presented above, you can consider which assessment methods (eg which specific ability tests, personality questionnaires, what sort of interviews) are suitable for your particular recruiting needs. For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus solely on the options for cognitive ability testing and how it can be used at different stages in the selection process. First, recommendations are provided for low-touch assessment (online testing), then for high-touch assessment (supervised ability testing using paper and pencil administration):

Low-touch assessments

A perfect example of a low-touch assessment is a short and *unsupervised online ability test*. It requires very little human interaction, can be given to multiple candidates at the same time and comes at a low cost per candidate. This type of assessment can be recommended for use at an early stage in the selection process, when the main focus is to sift out candidates that are clearly unsuitable for the job role, thereby creating a reduced applicant pool.

Online testing of cognitive ability saves time and effort for both the company and the candidates, since it allows only a small number of candidates to advance to the more high-touch final selection stage. However, there are some critical 'best practices' to consider when using unsupervised online tests at the second stage of the selection process to ensure fairness and test security. These 'best practices' are explained below:

- *Clear instructions*
  It is essential to give candidates clear instructions about the testing conditions and also to warn against cheating. All applicants should also be informed about the whole selection process. This implies that they will be informed that a supervised ability assessment will follow at the final stage in the selection process. Cheating therefore becomes less appealing as it will only help a candidate to proceed to the next stage where supervised ability testing will be used. In addition, in order to ensure fair test conditions, it is important to provide all applicants with clear instructions on what the ideal test-taking setting is. This means that they will be advised to create a test-taking environment where they will not be interrupted and to use reliable technology that operates properly.

- *Honesty contract*
  The practitioner is advised to establish an honesty contract with the candidate, wherein the candidate is required to agree that they will not misuse the trust of the practitioner by cheating on the test in any way, for example by having someone else take the test in their place.

- *Preparation leaflets*
  All candidates should also have the opportunity to prepare for the assessment by practising before taking the test. This ensures that all candidates have a similar level of familiarity with the test, avoiding a situation where prior experience with online tests would influence their results. It also enhances the fairness of the process and the validity of the test, since the practitioner can be sure that it actually is the candidate's ability that is being measured and not their familiarity with ability tests.

- **Limited test-taking time**
  By limiting the time of the test and only allowing the candidate to complete it in one session, it is next to impossible for the candidate to cheat. If the test session gets interrupted, the candidate cannot log in again and take it another time. Instead he or she has to contact the practitioner, who in turn will get the test reset. This ensures that the items in the test are protected from abuse.

- **Item banking vs changing item order**
  To deal with the issues of cheating and a candidate taking the same test multiple times, many online ability tests also rely on 'item banking'. Item-banked tests consist of a random combination of items that are changed in every testing session, and are matched in terms of difficulty together with other characteristics. By using this technique, each candidate is presented with different questions and, in effect, a new test every time.
  As an alternative to item banking, the risk of cheating can also be minimised through changing the order of the items randomly for every test, without changing the items themselves. This is simply referred to as 'changing the order of items'.
  Although there are discussions about whether item banking is a more successful option, there is still no substantial evidence for using one approach as opposed the other.

If the issues with online tests are handled appropriately using the best practices outlined above, this low-touch approach can be used to effectively sift out unsuitable candidates early on and get a high-quality and low-cost selection process without sacrificing fairness and test security.

High-touch assessments

At the final stage of the selection process, also called 'select-in', the best approach is to apply a more high-touch assessment. The successful candidates from the second stage are invited to take a longer, *supervised* paper and pencil ability test, assessing their cognitive ability in more detail. At this stage, tests can be specifically selected according to the relevant areas of ability given the job and its requirements. Since longer tests are more reliable, the information obtained about the candidates' ability for the specific role will be more accurate than the information obtained from shorter and, hence, less reliable ability assessments. This approach will yield well founded and fair decisions to confidently contribute to the case for a hiring decision.

Best practices for this stage of selection are:

- **Clear instructions**
  When administering ability tests in paper and pencil format, it is essential to use standardised administration instructions. This ensures that all candidates receive the same instructions before completing the test. The administrator should also ensure that ideal test conditions are created (ie test-takers are not distracted or interrupted).

- **Test selection based on suitability and relevance for the role**
  At this stage of the selection process it is particularly important that all relevant information about each candidate is obtained to ensure that a good selection decision can be made. Ideally, the practitioner should be able to choose from a wide range of tests designed for different occupations with each of them measuring different areas of ability relevant to the job. The ability tests used at this stage should then be chosen carefully based on the requirements of the role to be filled. The selected tests should suit the assessment purpose in terms of areas of ability as well as content and difficulty level.

- **Base your final selection decision on the right information**
  Unsupervised online testing is an effective way of deselecting unsuitable candidates early on in the selection process. However, when making the final selection decision, only the results obtained from supervised testing in the final selection stage should be considered. In other words, whereas the results from the unsupervised online test are exclusively used to determine who proceeds to the high-touch part of the selection process, *the combined results of the supervised ability test, the assessment centre and details from the CV ultimately determine who the successful candidate is.*

Top seven reasons why practitioners should adopt this new approach

There are many benefits to be gained for practitioners and companies by using this new approach to personnel selection.

1. This approach gives companies a way to reach out to and access a **more widespread geographical applicant pool** by conducting the first assessment online, increasing the possibility of finding the best candidate for the position.

2. Using online testing as part of the selection process creates sifting opportunities based on suitability early on in the recruiting process.

3. Given that high-touch assessments can be used with a reduced number of candidates at a later stage, the overall approach is both **less costly and less time consuming**.

4. Comparing the traditional and the modern approaches at the second round of sifting, it is obvious that ability assessment is a far more objective way of deselecting candidates than the subjective interview process.

5. The supervised paper and pencil tests provide more detailed and comprehensive information about the candidates' levels of ability, **enhancing the prediction** of who out of the remaining candidates will perform best in the job role.

6. The modern approach is also beneficial in terms of **employer branding**. Candidates are assessed for general suitability with a low-touch online ability test prior to proceeding to the more time consuming final selection stage. As a result, the candidate's experience of the selection process tends to be positive (ie candidates won't feel that they have invested too much time and effort in the process when they're clearly not suitable). With this approach, candidates also have the freedom to decide when and where to take their screening tests and can choose a comfortable and non-threatening environment that works for them. This creates a selection process that is fair and objective and more inviting than most and gives an organisation a **positive public image** demonstrating its commitment to effective and objective assessment methods, to respect its candidates' time investment.

7. Using unsupervised online testing in the second stage of selection as a replacement for time-intensive interviews is much more efficient. Unsupervised online testing at stage two creates two-tiered savings: firstly, in time per candidate, and secondly, in the overall length of the second phase of selection. It is possible to go through the second stage of assessment within as little as a week when using online ability tests; hence less time passes between the initial application form/CV sifting stage and the final 'select-in' stage. This is beneficial not only because vacancies could be filled more quickly, but also because potentially good candidates are not lost to other job offers in the meantime.

For the reasons outlined above, during the last few years, online ability testing has come to play an essential part in selection. The demand for online testing is growing rapidly and holds promising developments in the future given the reduction of time and costs per hire, and the provision of reliable and valid estimates of future job performance.

Selecting for potential

OPP®'s approach to selection offers assessments at all levels, preferring low-touch unsupervised assessment at the second stage of selection, prior to proceeding to high-touch assessment methods in the final stage. For low-touch assessment, unsupervised online ability tests are available for different job levels. For high-touch assessment, OPP offers a range of ability assessments designed for different job levels measuring different areas of ability. This combined low- and high-touch approach gives clients the choice of the most suitable assessment methods for their organisation's needs. Using a combination of online ability tests followed by comprehensive, supervised ability assessments demonstrates OPP's commitment to fairness and test security.

For more information about OPP's approach to selection, please contact OPP's Consultancy Helpdesk on 01865 404 636 or visit www.opp.eu.com/select.

For other enquiries, please contact us on 0845 603 9958 or visit our website at www.opp.eu.com.