

Square Peg, Square Hole

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You can look into an employee's cubicle many times a day, but how many times can you look inside his head? Understanding an employee's motivations, desires and fears can help a manager boost morale by putting people in the right roles. Psychometric testing has long been advanced as a way of assessing an individual's capabilities and character.

Psychometric tests can be valuable for the depth of information they provide about employees, says Trevor West, founder of Kewlona, B.C.-based Psychometrics West. "By depth of information I mean determining the speed and accuracy of how people work. Determining what their motivation to work is, and what level of interest they have," he says. "Then we can really determine what their fit is for the work they've chosen to do. Do we have a square peg in a round hole?"

Rick Lash, vice-president of Hay Group, says there are three main categories of psychometric testing. Cognitive ability measurers assess intelligence, which is measured in different ways, he warns. Employees can be measured for verbal processing ability, numerical skills and conceptual thinking.

Another category measures personality, assessing individual characteristics. Myers Briggs is a popular personality test, characterizing people on dimensions such as whether they are introverted or extroverted.

"One of the biggest problems they had with a lot of testing, going back to the '60s and '70s where they were using a lot of personality and IQ measures to select people for jobs, was that they didn't predict success in a role," Mr. Lash says. There was evidence to suggest many such tests were culturally biased and some even used general knowledge questions that prejudiced against people from other countries, for example. This is why the third type of test, which measures behaviour, is so important. Testing people to assess behavioural characteristics can be used to match them against an ideal set of behavioural requirements for a particular role, he suggests. Companies can use these tests to help them decide which employees to hire, and which ones to promote when opportunities arise. But they can also provide employees and managers with a profile of an individual's characteristics, to help them map out a career within the company.

Psychometric testing has fulfilled both these requirements at Roche Diagnostics, a diagnostic health-care equipment vendor based in Montreal. The company uses psychometric testing as part of a competency model for selection and development purposes the company introduced eight years ago, says Catherine Lemyre organizational development manager.

"We can make better decisions when it comes to promoting someone internally," says Ms. Lemyre, who uses a mixture of cognitive, behavioural and personality tests to assess employees.

"We have also achieved better retention of our employees, because they feel that their development is important and that the company is investing a lot in them," she says.

Nevertheless, there can be some downsides to psychometric testing. For example, some employees may resent what they feel is an intrusion into a private area, and may fear that employers will use the results against them. "Information sharing up front is really critical," says Mr. West. "Sitting and talking to them and telling them how it works, along with the types of question they will face." It's also important that a company explains what the information will be used for. For example, if a test is being conducted purely for developmental purposes, it must be made clear that it will not affect any immediate employment decisions that are made.

Reducing anxiety can help to make results more valid, says Mr. West, because employers must be honest when taking the tests. If they attempt to 'game' the system by securing their answers to achieve a particular result, assessors will probably be able to detect this because of the way that the questions are structured, Mr. West warns.

Such attempts at skewing results can also be mitigated by testing other employees on how they view a particular person within an organization -- a technique known as 360 multi rating. If an employee views himself in one light while numerous colleagues have an opposing view, this can trigger further analysis and investigation.

This is why the role of the assessor in interpreting the result is crucial. Assessors have to use their knowledge of the subject and the role within the company that they are in or are working towards. The results of the psychometric test can then be used as a kick-off point for further evaluation.

Even though there is a scientific measure, the tests should always be complemented with other assessment techniques, says Lemyre. "So we use the tests to complement what we observed in an interview and drill down on any traits or questions that might have been raised during the interviewing process."

Psychometric testing may not enable you to pigeonhole employees simply by looking at a scorecard, but it can provide you with a better understanding of their character and behavioural traits that could complement your knowledge of that individual and help inform future decisions about their career within the company. In the constant battle to retain employees and maintain morale, it can be a powerful tool.