

Employers using personality tests before hiring

By Harry Wessel
THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

(KRT) — Not so long ago, getting a job was a three-step process. You filled out an application, handed in a résumé and sat down for a face-to-face interview.

Increasingly, a fourth step has been added: a pre-employment test — although it usually is not called a test — designed to predict how you will behave on the job.

These predictive-behavior personality tests — also known as personality assessments, profiles, surveys, inventories, etc. — are used by most Fortune 1,000 companies and increasingly by medium-sized and small companies as the test cost drops and their availability increases.

Some experts say the tests do a better job than face-to-face interviews in predicting job performance. Chockalingam Viswesvaran, a Florida International University psychology professor and researcher widely known as "Dr. Vish," does not agree. There aren't any empirical studies on the ability of interviews to predict specific negative behaviors, Viswesvaran

said, but "for overall job performance, an interview is a better predictor than a personality test."

However, he said the type of predictive-behavior tests he has studied, known as "integrity" or "honesty" tests, have been highly accurate in predicting specific counterproductive behaviors, such as theft and absenteeism.

Viswesvaran believes the increased use of personality tests started after a 1993 task force report by the American Psychology Association said these tests were OK. "It gave a big push to the industry," he said, "and around 1995 the testing industry took off."

There now are hundreds of different tests on the market, leading Viswesvaran and other experts to warn that employers must be careful in choosing which test to use, and once the choice is made, not to put too much stock in it.

"My feeling is they're overused and overinterpreted," said Eduardo Salas, a professor of industrial psychology at the University of Central Florida.

"They have limited

validity when used by themselves."

Companies that make and market predictive-behavior tests acknowledge their limitations. "You should never base a hiring decision solely on an assessment result," said Markku Kauppinen, president of Extended Disc North America. Extended Disc's questionnaire creates a "behavioral profile" used for hiring decisions as well as for employee development.

Employers "have an easy time identifying skill requirements," Kauppinen said. "They have a harder time identifying behavioral requirements. When the fit is right, both employer and employee will be more satisfied."

But with many of the tests, the promise to employers goes beyond satisfaction to tangible pocketbook issues. A Minneapolis-based testing company, ePredix, cites studies indicating that companies using its tests experience a decrease in absenteeism and turnover.

A regional bottling company cut the number of sick days in half; an

airline reduced tardiness by one-third; a national retailer reduced its employee turnover by 40 percent, according to company literature.

"You're asking a number of questions about how they (prospective employees) will behave in a situation, or facts about themselves. These factors statistically relate to future job performance, explains Katrina Dewar, ePredix's founder and chief executive officer.

For example, an ePredix assessment tailored for a customer-service position includes the following multiple-choice question:

"Which one of these would you like best? (Pick one): a. A job where I can work solving problems; b. A job where I can operate an office machine; c. A job where I can be dealing with people; d. A job that doesn't take too much thinking; e. A job where I can be working with numbers."

Darden Restaurants, an Orlando, Fla.-based Fortune 500 company, uses a "work-style inventory" as part of its hiring process. The inventory is used for all positions at the company, although

the higher the position, the more involved and lengthy the test.

"We don't call it a test. That has a connotation of pass-fail," said Kevin Cottingim, Darden's vice president of leadership development. The inventory "adds insights. We want to make sure we don't set up a person for failure. That's bad for our company and bad for the person."

Cottingim said Darden's inventory is a slightly better predictor of on-the-job behavior than a traditional face-to-face interview, but it's just one of several components of the hiring process. "If they don't get a job here, it was not because of the test."

Another Fortune 500 company, Illinois-based Household International, has used predictive-behavior tests for the past four years. Mari-Esther Norman, human resources manager in the financial service company's Jacksonville, Fla., call center, said the assessment is done on the computer, takes about 30 minutes and gives instant results.

The company has seen a decrease in absenteeism

and improved retention, Norman said, although it is too soon to say those changes are due to the test. But, she said, "I appreciate having a tool that gives us insight as to whether an applicant is right for the position."

Norman said the test can provide information that an interview can't. "In front of a computer, a person might be more frank and honest, compared to being under pressure in a face-to-face interview."

Some employers that use predictive tests do not use them for all employees. Disney and SunTrust, for example, use them only for executive and leadership positions.

Viswesvaran of Florida International University said the changing workplace, with an increasing emphasis on teamwork, makes tests that predict behavior and delve into personality more attractive to employers.

It is not enough for workers to be skilled at what they do, Viswesvaran said. "People need to be adaptable and flexible, so personality will play a major role."

SARS forces school to suspend Beijing program; causes alert at another

WIRE REPORT

(KRT) — The University of California has suspended its Beijing study abroad programs over fears of severe acute respiratory syndrome or SARS.

It ordered the return of 44 undergraduate students from Peking University and Beijing Normal University in Beijing. The decision came after a Peking University professor developed a confirmed case of SARS and the university learned of other confirmed cases in neighborhoods near the university, UC officials said. None of the students in the Education Abroad Program have been diagnosed with the syndrome.

"That was too close for comfort and that made the difference for us," said UC spokesman Bruce Hanna. "We've been trying to distinguish the actual risk from the perception of risk."

UC's decision follows discussion at universities across the country over whether to pull their students from areas of China with SARS outbreaks. Syracuse University in New York was one of the first to recall its students. Recently, the University of Michigan pulled three students studying in UC's Beijing program. On April 5, the Peace Corps also suspended its program in China.

UC waited until now to make the decision because it didn't want to overreact, Hanna said. Unlike some universities with study abroad programs, UC has a faculty member and its own staff in Beijing who were able to maintain close contact with health officials and monitor the status of SARS cases.

"This gave us the comfort in previous weeks to watch and wait and see," Hanna said.

UC will decide this month whether to cancel its summer programs in Beijing, which are scheduled to begin in late June.

The World Health Organization reported recently a total of

3,389 cases of SARS worldwide with 165 deaths in 25 countries. The United States has had 199 cases and no deaths.

WHO reported that animal experiments had determined the cause of SARS was a new member of the coronavirus family.

Of the 44 UC students pulled from Beijing, 10 were from UC Berkeley, six from UC Davis and four from UC Santa Cruz. The students have been advised to monitor their health for 10 days after their return and not visit dorms or other crowded places.

Seton Hall University in New Jersey put its campus on alert recently for SARS after learning that one of its students may have had the illness, health officials said.

The student, along with a 68-year-old woman, were the state's fourth and fifth suspected cases of SARS, a mysterious, sometimes fatal respiratory illness that originated in China last fall, according to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services.

Both patients, who were unidentified, have completely recovered, state officials said.

The woman traveled to Asia March 14, developed a cough on March 23, and a fever on March 25, state officials said. The woman was hospitalized overnight in China and was released the next day when her fever was gone. Her cough subsided on March 30, and she returned to New Jersey on April 11.

The student is one of the few U.S. cases of secondary transmission — someone who caught the disease here, instead of Asia. The student had symptoms of a respiratory illness before being visited in a dormitory for a couple of hours April 5 by a relative later diagnosed with SARS, according to an e-mail sent to Seton Hall staff

and students by Eddy A. Bresnitz, the state epidemiologist.

The student developed a fever and worsening symptoms after the exposure, but was not hospitalized and is doing well.

"It is unclear whether the Seton Hall student actually had SARS, and it is unlikely that


anyone other than the student's roommates had the level of contact with the student sufficient to acquire SARS," Bresnitz wrote.

"The potential for transmission to anyone on campus is very low."

No one has gone to the student health center complaining

of any symptoms, spokeswoman Jennifer Hopek said.

The CDC distinguishes between suspected cases of SARS — a 100.4-degree fever and other symptoms — and probable cases, defined as having SARS symptoms and X-ray or autopsy evidence of pneumonia or respiratory distress.



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