

Personality Test

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Don't be surprised if your next job interview or performance review includes a personality test. Such tests have evolved into a \$400 million business, with more than 2,500 tests currently available. The tests generally measure "soft" skills, such as sociability, ambition and organizational ability.

Most are designed to help ensure a good fit between an individual and a job. But while personality testing is playing an increasingly prominent role in the workplace, there is a wide range of opinion about its value and reliability.

In a recent study by Spherion, for example, nearly one-third of workers (32 percent) agreed that personality tests can help determine if a prospective employee will fit in at a company or organization. But an even higher percentage – 40 percent – said testing is not helpful in that way.

Nonetheless, as the cost of recruiting and retaining workers escalates, many workers can expect to be tested at some point. But they don't need to take the tests blindly. Here are three strategies to demystify and enhance the testing experience.

Know the test and the tester

Even proponents of testing agree that there is room for improvement. Ideally, testing should be done by a professional, such as an industrial and organizational psychologist. Unfortunately, that's not the norm. Also, many tests are not suited for the workplace (one popular test is designed to clinically assess people with mental illness) and are not properly analyzed.

So, ask about the test you will be taking and then study up on it. Understanding the test's structure and intent will help calm your nerves and make it more likely you will provide accurate and useful answers.

Also, ask about the qualifications of the scorer/interpreter.

Privacy matters

When you take a test, you are divulging a wealth of personal information. In order to feel confident about giving honest answers, you need to determine who will see the results and how widely they will be disseminated.

Some companies may balk at providing this information. But how they handle your questions will give you a good idea of the company culture. If they respond by being hostile, evasive or even disorganized ("we're not sure who'll be evaluating your application, we've had a lot of changes and right now we're recruiting for several key positions,") you may want to look elsewhere.

Keep it legal

The company has an obligation to obey federal and state workplace laws. Any questions that would be prohibited in an interview or on an application cannot appear on a test. For example, questions about religion, marital status, sexual preference, political affiliation or physical or mental disabilities are strictly forbidden.

There are a number of reasons a company might err in this respect, from carelessness to a deliberate attempt to weed out "undesirable" applicants. Any of those possibilities should send up red flags. A workplace should be fair and operate within the law. Anything else, from favoritism to fraud, is unacceptable.

So, get out your No. 2 pencil (or more likely, your computer keyboard) and give that company a run for its money. Take a hard look and see if it measures up to your standards