

# Handling Pre-employment Screenings and Assessments



Employers are increasingly using pre-screening and assessment techniques early in the interviewing process typically after one or more initial phone screenings and before the first face-to-face interview or between the first and second interview. Sometimes they are used only when the field is narrowed down to just a few candidates. Ira Wolfe, author and president of Success Performance Solutions, cites surveys that indicate more than 80 percent of Fortune 500s use assessments for executive positions and says that small businesses also use them. "Utilization, however, is growing," Wolfe says.

Executive recruiter Lorne Epstein, who conducts these screening procedures on behalf of his client employers, says the purpose of the pre-screens and assessments is to "assure the company is hiring a reliable and qualified manager/executive." Epstein adds that because hiring decision-makers are "trusting the future of the company in [candidates'] hands with little or no direct experience of their professional ability," testing prospective hires is good business. John M. Beane, president of Staff Development Services in Leland, NC, notes that an appropriate assessment can provide information about how well a candidate "can handle the tasks associated with the position and how will he or she handle the people."

"Many companies are moving looking beyond just past credentials and past experience to using pre-hire assessments," says Jan Margolis, founder and managing director of Metuchen, N.J.-based Applied Research Corporation, "which are more accurate predictors of future success or derailment in a new job and work culture."

Experts also point to the objectivity of these methods and the notion that they prevent hiring decision-makers from being influenced by what Epstein calls "the candidate's charisma or ability to persuade."

The use of pre-employment screenings and assessments has increased, Beane notes, because "as people have become better educated they have also become increasingly manipulative of their personal information." Beane discounts the value of resumes because of "people taking credit for things they did not do or claim[ing] educational backgrounds that may not exist." "A objective third-party assessment is a useful aid in selection decisions as it objectively identifies and describes the executive's job-relevant characteristics, such as their personal style, ways of delegating, making decisions and problem-solving," Margolis says. "It does not evaluate professional or technical qualifications, but rather, focuses on the executive's

capacity to lead and manage others effectively.”

Assessments may measure such areas as skills, behaviors, motivation, and attitudes, says Norm Bobay, president of hireMAX, Fort Worth, TX. Another area sometimes assessed is honesty and integrity. Among the types of pre-screens and assessments that employers may require are:

- *Predictive Index*, which Epstein describes as “an online survey that tells me what type of person the candidate is and how he or she works with others as well as what’s going in his or her life now.
- [\*Kolbe A® Index\*](#), which measures a person’s instinctive method of operation, and identifies the ways he or she will be most productive.
- [\*Hogan Development Survey\*](#), identifies personality-based performance risks and derailers of interpersonal behavior that affect an individual’s leadership style and actions.
- *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*, is a well-known personality assessment, the use of which in hiring is controversial at best. The Myers-Briggs “is not intended for hiring or job-candidate selection, and ... its use as a hiring tool is unethical,” says an article by Douglas P. Shuit on the Workforce Management Website, citing Michael Segovia, director of business development at CPP Inc., publishers of the Myers-Briggs.
- [\*Simmons Personal Survey\*](#), which measures job-related emotional and behavioral tendencies, such as energy, stress, optimism, self-esteem, commitment to work, attention to detail, desire for change, physical courage, self-direction, assertiveness, tolerance, consideration for others, and sociability.
- *The Executive Achiever*, which looks at intelligence, knowledge of leadership skills, and a variety of leadership personality traits.
- *Profiles*, which gauges cognitive, behavioral, and conative (occupational interests) attributes.
- *Caliper Profile*, which measures more than 25 personality traits that relate to job performance.
- [\*SmartAssessment\*](#), which Thor Mann, principal with ghSMART, the management-assessment firm behind SmartAssessment, says comprises “a straightforward 4.5-hour biographical interview that captures themes related to fit for a role from childhood through all stages of education and each and every job the candidate has had.” Candidates are rated according to their probability of success in the role, Mann says.
- [\*Five-factor personality assessments\*](#), a variety of assessments that measure the “Big Five” personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (sometimes known as emotional stability).
- [\*DiSC\*](#), which profiles four primary behavioral styles (dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness) each with a distinct and predictable pattern of observable behavior.
- [\*Business Values and Motivators\*](#), based on the premise that if the job or culture is valued, employees will be motivated; this assessment tells what employees value.
- [\*Key Management Dynamics Assessment\*](#) from Objective Management Group, designed specifically for the executive team and candidates for executive leadership positions. It measures nine styles and 16 qualities.
- *Questionnaires and essay-style applications*. Epstein uses one with 5-10 questions that “asks the candidate to describe in detail what they did, how they did it, and what challenges they overcame.” The questionnaire enables recruiters and employers “to dig deeper in the interview,” Epstein says. Social networking strategist David Nour recommends asking candidates to profile a leader or executive after which they wish to model themselves. Speaker and hiring expert Karl Ahlrichs notes that essay-style applications “instantly screen out people

who don't want to invest time" in the employer's hiring process and "helps identify people who are likely to fit into the organization."

In addition to these types of assessments, Wolfe notes that general reasoning or cognitive tests to evaluate how quickly candidates can process new information and evaluate complex scenarios are gaining popularity.

Candidates should be aware of what they're getting into before undergoing pre-screens and assessments. Susan Guarneri, whose tagline is "Career Assessment Goddess," suggests that candidates consider requesting information on the purpose of the assessment as well as its validity and reliability. Calling such a request a "delicate issue to bring up," Guarneri recommends "reading the situation and using good judgment." Citing assessments like the Myers-Briggs that are not intended for candidate selection in the hiring process, Guarneri states that "just because the assessment is routinely used by a company and has not been challenged legally does not necessarily make it reliable and valid for hiring purposes." At the very least, Guarneri says, "the candidate needs to inquire about privacy practices for retention of the assessment results, as well as the test-taking situation." While Epstein assures candidates that assessments are safe and private, with information shared with no one, Guarneri advises: "You have the right to understand the criteria for pre-selection, the rationale for the use of the assessment, and the measures that will be taken to safeguard your privacy."

The degree to which you can prepare for pre-screens and assessment varies with the method used. In fact, many assessments are designed so that the user cannot prepare for them. You can, however, ensure that you are well-rested, Guarneri advises, and that you take the assessment in quiet, private surroundings. If the employer requires multiple assessments, she suggests that the candidate avoid assessment burn-out by taking time in between to stretch, get something to drink, and mentally unwind before proceeding to the next assessment.

Try to skim the assessment so you have an idea of how much time to devote to each question or section. During the assessment, apply the techniques you normally summon to subdue stress and keep yourself relaxed.

For the questionnaire and essay-style methods, Epstein advises candidates to keep a journal of their successes and past work accomplishments "so they can give a detailed and accurate account of what they did and with whom they did it with." Epstein notes that his firm checks this information with their references later on.

While undergoing the assessment or prescreen, "candidates should give as much detail as possible and always be truthful," Epstein advises.

Guarneri agrees: "Do not try to 'game' the test by responding with answers you believe will make you look like a better candidate. Why contort yourself through your answers into something you are not? You will be doing a disservice to yourself, as well as the prospective employer. Instead, by responding honestly and with your first gut-level reaction, you will be revealing the 'real you' that either will be a good fit with the job and organization or not. Answer the questions according to how you actually are and not how you would like to be."

"Creating a false image of who you are may get you hired, but success and satisfaction in the job will be hit-or-miss," Wolfe adds.

Wolfe assures candidates that "there are no right or wrong responses on personality, behavior, values, and attitude assessments. He notes that when these assessments are properly used, "candidates are merely matched against benchmarks that demonstrate

patterns of other executives who have been successful. By comparing individual results to a baseline, candidates can be evaluated for job, team, and culture fit. Wolfe also points out that “assessments benefit the candidate as much as the company. Being hired for a job that will only result in missed expectations benefits neither the candidate nor the organization.”

“If the information gleaned from an assessment is confirmed in the interview and the candidate doesn’t appear to be a good fit for the job, team and/or culture, then the candidate might be excluded,” Wolfe says.

Be aware, though, that, as Dave Kurlan points out, “Legally, an assessment cannot be the sole reason for ending a candidate’s consideration.” Kurlan, who is the founder and CEO of Objective Management Group, Inc., in Westboro, MA, points out, “background, references, track record, industry fit, the phone conversation, intelligence, skills, the interview, and chemistry should all play a part, as well.”

Similarly, Wolfe says the assessment makes up “only a third of the total rating on the candidate. The remaining two-thirds comes from the interview and the resume/background checks.”

Darleen DeRosa, Ph.D., managing partner at Onpoint Consulting in Connecticut, says some common reasons that organizations choose not to proceed with a candidate include “concern over leadership ability (person may be very strong functionally or technically but lacks effective leadership skills); concern about cultural fit or team fit (person may not be collaborative when culture emphasizes this, or the person might not work well on a senior team due to style), or the person lacks self-awareness and may not be able to change his/her behaviors.”

Wolfe reassures candidates that “many times exclusion isn’t because the candidate isn’t highly qualified but the organization may not be ready for a candidate with advanced talents and skills. Candidates aren’t always excluded because they don’t make the grade but because the organization is not advanced enough for them.”

If you find that you are getting screened out of the interview process after undergoing a pre-screen or assessment, consider working with an executive or career coach. “Many people feel they have the character traits to be an executive, but few actually have them,” observes Beane. “If only one person can be chosen, then the person having the best interview, background references, and came out best on the assessment would get the job,” he says.

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