



State and federal laws ban discrimination on the basis of race, religious creed, color, national origin, ancestry, physical handicap, medical condition, marital status, sex, or age. In addition, they discourage questions about personal variables as child-care arrangements, a spouse, height and weight, pregnancy, membership in organizations, or home ownership. While by themselves such items are not illegal, the employer shoulders the burden of proving nondiscrimination if a complaint is filed.

A final consideration with regard to written biographical data is that fabrications are common. Every now and then we hear about a surgeon who has been operating at the county hospital without benefit of medical degree and formal education. How did he get there? Somebody once took his word about his qualifications. Although some surgeon stories end with an ironic twist about the impostor's superior performance, how frequently do fabricated claims about nursery experience, mechanical knowledge, or typing speed lead to lousy on-the-job performance?

The moral is obvious. The written word does not necessarily reflect reality (nor does the spoken word). Talk can be cheap, even in written form. It is best to use written forms to gather data on objective, verifiable items, and to use one or more of the other information sources to spot-verify them. Tests and structured interviews can be used to check applicant allegations and manager assumptions. References also may be useful as a supplement to, not substitute for, the other sources.

Tests

The very word—test—strikes fear into the hearts of both job applicants and managers. Emotional, practical, and legal factors have kept many farm employers from using tests in pre-employment screening, and that is regrettable. Only through some form of testing can farmers (and other employers) find out what a job applicant really can do. Testing helps distinguish a person who can actually do the job from one who talks a good game in an interview.

Basically, a test is any means of sampling a person's behavior for assessment. The ideal selection test samples the behavior required in performance of a given job. Since it is rarely possible to present actual job conditions to all applicants, different types of tests are used. The important principle to remember in using them is that the scores or assessments they yield should correlate highly with future job performance.

The extent to which a test does correlate with job performance is its validity. No test, in itself, is either valid or invalid. Validity is job specific—and often site specific as well. The exercise that effectively distinguishes good from bad milker candidates is probably far less valid as a predictor of truck driving performance.

Research shows, however, that some types of tests tend to be more valid, and therefore better, than others.

Personality tests are the least valid and reliable as selection tools. Standard personality tests were designed more for pre-therapy diagnosis than pre-employment screening. While many large companies put top executive candidates through extensive personality testing by specialists, these devices are of virtually no use in most selection decisions. They are best left to the purposes of therapists and counselors.

Paper and pencil tests can have high validity if well chosen or specially constructed. They typically measure knowledge, general intelligence, and aptitudes in cognitive areas. Managers can design their own to assess specific knowledge needed in a position. Standard paper and pencil tests are also available commercially. Catalogs of some vendors include informative discussions on testing in general and touted tests in particular. Links to examples are at *AgHelpWanted.org*.

Performance simulations sample behavior similar to but not quite the same as actual job duties. Examples include flight simulation exercises on fixed machines rather than airplanes, mechanical ability tests using tinker toys or other materials, strength and balance demonstrations using weights and balance beams, and supervisory role-plays. Among many standardized simulations with colorful names are the O'Connor Finger and Tweezer Dexterity Test, Minnesota Clerical Test, and Crawford Small Part Dexterity Test. They assess such job-related abilities as hand-eye coordination, manual dexterity, spatial relationships, and color discrimination. Apparatus, administration and scoring guide, and norm scores for comparison come with most packaged simulations.

An agricultural business that used a battery of six standardized simulations (administered by an external consultant) in selecting new entry-level employees has been very satisfied with the results. Finger-dexterity and eye-hand coordination trials resembled the small-plant grafting and cutting work required on the job. The employer found people who definitely were capable, and applicants who were hired felt good that they had fairly established their qualifications. Because they became familiar with the kind of work expected as they went through testing, new employees hired under this system also were more rapidly oriented once on the job.

Work samples, slices of the actual job to be done, are generally the most valid form of testing. They are relatively easy to construct for most manual jobs that produce a tangible result. When hiring a mechanic, lettuce cutter, egg sorter, or truck driver, why not ask applicants to diagnose a "clank," select a few heads, tray-up some eggs, or drive the machine? Testing for abilities that are easily

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measured, however, should not take precedence over testing for those that are relatively more critical to job performance.

A work sample was used to good effect in the selection of forklift operators in a packing shed. Each applicant was asked to stack and then unstack five large bins. The test was administered under conditions consistent across applicants, and performance was measured by the number of errors and the time taken to complete the task. An extensive list of references on personnel testing and assessment is at AgHelpWanted.org.

Interviews

The interview is the single most commonly used source of information in employee selection, and it has multiple functions. As a two-way communication vehicle, it provides information to employer and applicant. The savvy applicant understands that the conduct of the interview reflects management attitudes and organizational practices that will affect her worklife if she comes aboard. But wanting to make a good impression on prospective employees is certainly not the main reason for being organized in selection interviews.

Despite its widespread use, the traditional interview is notoriously invalid and unreliable as a predictor of performance, so reliance on it results in the wrong person getting selected. Problems with interviews mostly boil down to interviewer subjectivity and bias.

Specifically, research shows that casual interviewers tend to: (1) make premature summary judgments in the first two to three minutes of the interview; (2) search more for negative than positive information as the interview progresses (thus, an initial good impression is more likely to change for the worse than an initial bad one for the better); (3) possess an understanding of job duties insufficient to adequately judge applicants; (4) assess applicants very leniently when under time pressure to fill a job; (5) contrast interviewees against previous applicants rather than a consistent standard; (6) hold stereotyped notions of “ideal applicants,” more consistent with characteristics of the interviewer than successful job incumbents; (7) attribute “halos” to applicants who have one key quality that the interviewer particularly values; and (8) vary questions, opportunities to respond, and other interview conditions from applicant to applicant (discussion of rater biases in performance evaluation is in Chapter 5).

These problems not only reduce the objectivity of the information but also put the employer at some legal jeopardy. The interview, like other assessment tools, is legally a *type of test*, subject to the same scrutiny given to hands-on or written tests. Interview results are vulnerable to legal challenge, and litigation brought by applicants who feel unjustly treated after interviews has been on the increase.