



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

CAHRS ResearchLink

Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies
(CAHRS)

11-2010

Should Personality Testing Be Part of the Hiring Process?

Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs_researchlink

 Part of the [Human Resources Management Commons](#)

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

Support this valuable resource today!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in CAHRS ResearchLink by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact catherwood-dig@cornell.edu.

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact web-accessibility@cornell.edu for assistance.

Should Personality Testing Be Part of the Hiring Process?

Abstract

KEY FINDINGS

- Job candidates who fail a personality test the first time often change their responses dramatically on the second test—even though adult personality is known to be generally stable and unlikely to change in the short interval (in this study, one year) between tests.
- Internal candidates are more likely than external candidates to retest, a tendency companies themselves may unwittingly encourage by providing test-specific feedback.

Keywords

Talent management, Recruitment, Selection, Hiring, Personality tests, Assessment

Disciplines

Human Resources Management

Comments

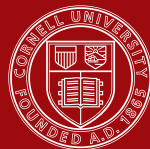
Recommended Citation

Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies. (2010, November). *Should personality testing be part of the hiring process?* (CAHRS ResearchLink No. 12). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, ILR School.

SHOULD PERSONALITY TESTING BE PART OF THE HIRING PROCESS?

Key Findings

- Job candidates who fail a personality test the first time often change their responses dramatically on the second test— even though adult personality is known to be generally stable and unlikely to change in the short interval (in this study, one year) between tests.
- Internal candidates are more likely than external candidates to retest, a tendency companies themselves may unwittingly encourage by providing test-specific feedback.

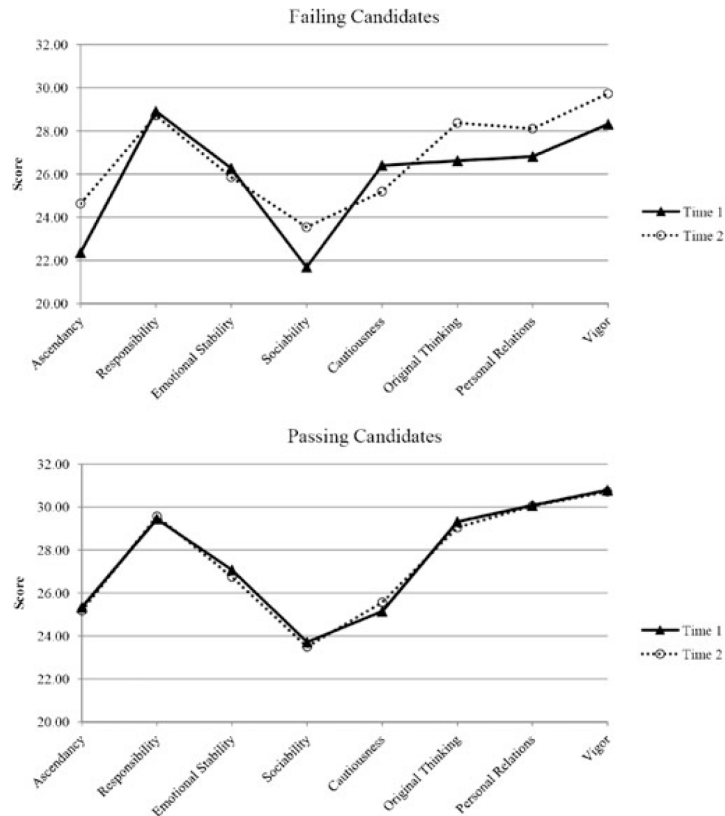


Cornell University
ILR School
Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies

193 Ives Hall, Ithaca, NY 14850 | 607.255.9358 | www.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs

Topic

Given that some companies use personality tests as part of their hiring processes, this study explores whether these questionnaires are reliable measures on which to base employment decisions. Specifically, this study looks at the propensity of failing candidates to take the tests over and how scores change on second attempts, in an actual workplace setting. Insight into the profile of retest candidates and the nature and magnitude of score changes can yield a better understanding of how to best use personality tests, if at all, when making hiring decisions.



Personality test practice effects for failing and passing candidates

Study Questions Results

- After failing a first test, do candidates change their personality profiles to make themselves more attractive to employers?
- Some candidates who pass the first time will retest in order to remain eligible for promotions. Do these candidates keep their answers the same the second time around?
- Are individuals who rate themselves as highly motivated more likely to retest?
- Are the odds of retesting higher for internal or external candidates?
- Personality profiles for passing candidates remained stable for all dimensions. However, failing candidates changed their answers to more traits and to a greater degree, exhibiting less stability in their personality profiles over time.
- In particular, failing candidates who retested significantly changed their answers on six of eight questions that measured personality traits: cautiousness, ascendancy, sociability, original thinking, personal relations, and vigor.
- Internal candidates were nearly 5 times more likely to retest than external candidates. However, candidates who rated themselves as highly responsible or motivated were not shown to have greater odds of retesting than other candidates.

Different answers, same personality?

With so much riding on the outcome of job screening personality tests, it's probably not surprising that failing candidates who opted to take retake the test would deliberately change their responses, an effect known as response distortion. Since the personality test is a factor in getting hired, candidates who don't get hired would be unwise to give the same answers a second time. While it's possible for personalities to genuinely change, experts generally agree that such changes occur gradually, across intervals of at least ten or twenty years (Ardelt, 2000). Instead, retesting usually takes place after a far shorter period—in this study, one year, and not enough time for genuine personality change to take place.

As noted, internal candidates were much more likely than external candidates to change their responses. This result isn't too surprising, given that internal candidates often benefit from test-specific feedback as well as "grapevine coaching" —consulting with coworkers on strategies and tips to pass the test on the next try (Sackett et al., 1989). Further, the extent to which promotion decisions are tied to test performance is well-known by internal candidates, so they have even more motivation to pass.

"No retesting"—a better policy?

The results of this study present a challenge to organizations that use personality assessment as part of their staffing process—calling into question whether such tests should even be used at all. For organizations that continue to see value in personality tests, the question becomes how to manage the substantial pool of failing candidates who want to retest.

A "no retesting" policy, however, may be unfair because it ignores an individual's ability to develop important job skills over time through targeted learning and development. It may also force candidates who fail to choose between a job plateau in the company or looking elsewhere for work. Given that retest candidates make up a sizable portion of an applicant pool, eliminating those candidates could make it harder for companies to fully staff open positions.

Takeaway

- Organizations should be cautious about using personality testing as part of the hiring process. The study shows that failing candidates changed their personality scores drastically between tests, even though adult personality is generally known to be stable.
- Companies that use personality testing should not base decisions solely on these scores; they should gather evidence from other sources (e.g., structured interviews).
- Companies should review their retesting policies carefully and gather data to understand the extent to which candidates repeat the process and to clarify whether those who eventually get hired are truly a good fit for the job.

Data Source

The study was done with a large service organization that, over a four-year period, screened more than 15,000 candidates for supervisory positions at various hotel and casino properties. Candidates completed a personality inventory as part of the company's assessment process, and offers were based partly on these scores.

The test sample included 357 individuals who reapplied for jobs (on average, one year later) after failing to receive an offer based on their initial application. Of this group, 301 were told that their personality test scores did not match the job requirements; the remaining 56 were told that they had "passed."



Researcher

John P. Hausknecht, assistant professor of human resource studies,
ILR School, Cornell University.
jph42@cornell.edu

References

- Ardelt M. (2000). Still stable after all these years? Personality stability theory revisited. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63, 392–405.
- Costa PT, Jr., McCrae RR. (1988). Personality in adulthood: A six-year longitudinal study of self-reports and spouse ratings on the NEO Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 853–863.
- Ellingson JE, Sackett PR, Connelly BS. (2007). Personality assessment across selection and development contexts: Insights into response distortion. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, 386–395.
- Kelley PL, Jacobs RR, Farr JL. (1994). Effects of multiple administrations of the MMPI for employee screening. *Personnel Psychology*, 47, 575–591.
- Rosse JG, Stecher MD, Miller JL, Levin RA. (1998). The impact of response distortion on preemployment personality testing and hiring decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83, 634–644.
- Sackett PR, Burris LR, Ryan AM. (1989). Coaching and practice effects in personnel selection. In Cooper CL, Robertson IT (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 145–183). New York: Wiley.