

The Personality Test Myth

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In his autobiography, *Straight From the Gut*, Jack Welch stresses how important it is to hire the right people but how difficult this is to do based on a resume and interview. He humorously relates that when he first became a manager, he hired a lot of “empty suits.” For all of us predicting who will be a top performer and a good fit for our organization is a daunting task because people are masters at portraying themselves as the perfect person for a job. As a result, we long for a crystal ball which will let us see how a person will perform and behave in the workplace. On the surface personality tests appear to be this crystal ball. This is the personality test myth. Scores on personality tests provide little information about how a person will actually perform and behave in the workplace or fit with an organization. In contrast Behaviorgrams act as a crystal ball. They provide the information that we need to hire people who have the right stuff for our job and will fit with our organization. This is because Behaviorgrams measure how people manage their world, accomplish work and interact with others.

The Basic Myth

Employee 1: My boss is great. At the end of the week we all go out and play golf and drink beer together.

Employee 2: My boss is a pain. He grills you for hours about what you have done and then becomes impatient if you don't give him the answers that he wants.

These are both descriptions of Jack Welch. They illustrate the basic myth on which personality tests rest, namely that people behave in the same way in each situation. At the heart of personality tests is the assumption that people have a core set of fixed personality

traits that predetermine their behavior. The problem is that people are inconsistent. They change their behavior based on the situation that they face and the people with whom they are interacting. Jack Welch was always a lot of fun when he went out after work with his employees at General Electric but when he went on plant visits, he was on an information collecting mission. He would intently question plant managers for hours to find out what was happening at a plant,. These are two very different personality profiles. The first is of an easy-going extrovert who likes to have fun. The other is of a tough executive who actively cross-examines his managers. Personality tests can't capture this complexity. The whole purpose of a personality test is to put people in a series of non-overlapping boxes. If you are in the nice guy box, you can't be in the tough guy box.

The other part of the personality test myth lies in the idea that you can obtain valuable information about who a person is and how they will behave by using a few large categories. Most popular personality tests only measure people on a few dimensions. The Big Five Personality test, as its name indicates, measures people on five traits. The Meyers Briggs test measures people on four dimensions; introversion v. extroversion, intuition v. sensation, thinking v. feeling, and judging v. perceiving. These categories are so broad that they don't tell us much about a person. As a consequence, people who are quite different can end up in the same categories which makes the categories poor predictors of behavior.

Why the Myth Persists

The personality test myth persists in part because putting people in categories is reassuring. We want to believe that Tom is an extrovert and always likes to go to parties and Mary is intuitive and makes decisions based on her feelings about a situation. If Tom

or Mary jump out of the category that we have assigned them, it is unsettling. We no longer feel that we really know the person. They have become unpredictable and as human beings we all feel safer when the world is predictable.

Personality tests are also attractive because they save us from doing a lot of cognitive heavy lifting. They provide what psychologists call mental shortcuts. We use mental shortcuts all the time because otherwise we would be overwhelmed with so much information that we wouldn't be able to function. Psychologists have found that if a person is identified as an "expert" on global warming, we will believe whatever they say about global warming even if it makes no sense. This is because when we hear the word "expert" we relax and turn off our critical faculties. This desire to conserve mental energy makes personality tests attractive. We can give people personality tests and receive impressive looking charts showing the categories into which people fall and avoid the detailed mental heavy lifting that is needed to find out how people will actually perform in the workplace.

Personality Tests Don't Predict Workplace Performance

Personality tests are poor predictors of workplace performance. Researchers have found only a small relationship between peoples' scores on personality tests and their performance in particular jobs. Moreover, the idea that a personality test can predict how an employee will perform rests on a misunderstanding about how statistics work. Any relationships found between job performance and tests scores are based on the job performance and test scores of a large number of people who have been lumped together for purposes of statistical analysis. Relationships based on a large group of people tell us nothing about how an individual person sitting in front of us with a particular personality

test score will behave and perform in the workplace. For this person there may be a strong relationship between their test scores and performance or the relationship may be only modest. Alternatively for this particular person there may be no relationship. There is no way of telling the relationship between personality test scores and job performance for an individual person.

Claims by test makers that personality tests are good predictors are also frequently misleading because they rest on a subtle but somewhat deceptive statistical distinction. The relationship between test scores and job performance can be statistically significant even though the relationship is extremely small because statistical significance only tells us whether the relationship would have occurred by chance. It says nothing about the size of the relationship. A relationship can be statistically significant even though it only explains 10% of the variability in job performance. Perfect relationships are ones where the test scores tells you exactly how someone will perform on the job. In this instance the test score explains 100% of the variability in job performance. Most relationships between personality test scores and job performance fall in the 10% range which means that they tell us almost nothing about how someone will perform on the job. These small relationships, however, can still be statistically significant suggesting to the uninitiated that they are meaningful.

This poor relationship between personality tests and job performance also makes intuitive sense. The traits that personality tests identify are typically so broad and ill defined that it would be hard to guess how they would affect performance in most jobs. Knowing that a person is an “judging” type, as measured by the Meyers Briggs, doesn’t provide any clues with regard to whether a person will be a good CEO or top sales person.

Another problem with personality tests that makes them unable to predict job performance with any certainty is that they measure a person at one point in time and ask them questions that require them to choose one behavior over another without any context. A person may be punctual on some days but not others or they may be punctual when going to a meeting but always be late for social gatherings. Moreover, a person's answers can be influenced by their current emotional state. If they are in a good mood, they may answer questions quite differently than if they are feeling worried and stressed.

Personality Tests are Easy to Manipulate

Before Hewlett Packard (HP) hired Carly Fiorina as CEO, they brought in a group of psychologists to determine if she was the right person for HP. The psychologists developed a 305 item questionnaire which she dutifully answered. Since Carly was hired by HP, she clearly answered these questions in ways that enhanced her candidacy for the job of CEO. Given that Carly is an extremely bright woman, she more than likely answered each question in a way which would further her goal of becoming CEO of HP. As most of us know, paper and pencil tests are easy to manipulate. We all are good at portraying ourselves in whatever way we think will get us the job.

Psychologists have also found in research studies that it is easy for people to fake personality tests. When they ask people to fake tests in a way that makes them an attractive candidate for a particular type of job, people produce profiles which fit with the job. People are also extremely good at providing answers that portray in a socially attractive manner. These results suggest that personality tests at best reveal whether a person has the social skills to present themselves in a way that fits with the job for which they are being tested.