

On-line assessment and the hiring manager: *Five questions to consider*

Timothy J. Rollier, M.S. and Charles A. Cowart, Ph.D.

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Computer technology and the internet have brought about a popular new trend among personnel specialists and hiring managers. The trend we refer to is known as online selection testing. Job candidates are administered a test on a computer and the HR manager is provided with a computer generated assessment report about the appropriateness of a given job candidate. This industry revolution provides a fast and convenient method for hiring managers to collect, translate and summarize job information about candidates for vacant positions within their organization. This technology may seem like a windfall to the busy HR professional, however, the reality is that convenience and technology give rise to new as well as some of the same old selection issues that are critical to making a hiring decision. In our efforts to explain and facilitate the use of this technology within an organization's selection system, we outline some of the main issues and concerns for hiring managers.

Before we get into the discussion of what one needs to know about this process, let us first explain what we mean by "online selection testing." Many of you may

already be familiar with the process; however, we define online selection testing as any procedure used to assess the knowledge, skills, abilities and/or traits of a job candidate by means of a computer that is linked to the internet. Such procedures usually involve a job candidate answering a given number of questions presented on the computer screen, similar to a paper and pencil test. A candidate's answers are passed through the internet and usually end up with a testing agency or medium which retains that information. Answers, or combinations of answers, will elicit a pattern of responses from a computer program, which typically selects prewritten sentences from a list to describe a candidate's features. A job candidate's responses are translated and assembled into an informative assessment report by the computer program. These tests and reports may provide all kinds of information about a job candidate including cognitive ability, personality traits, career interests and suitability for the job in question. In addition, such reports will typically provide graphs depicting a candidate's scores on given measures in relation to others.

Now that we have provided some clarity into what we mean by online testing and computer

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generated reports, we submit five questions that you should ask yourself as a hiring manager when using online/computer-driven job candidate screening methods.

Question 1: “*Is the test we use valid?*” This question concerns the construction of the test you are using to assess job candidates, and is the most important consideration when deciding to use a particular test. *Validity* refers to whether or not a test measures what it claims to measure. There are a host of issues that revolve around test validity, but here, we discuss some of the less technical aspects. What you ultimately want to know is *who* made the test and is it a *good* one. You should be aware of whether you use a well established and researched standardized test, or a tool developed “in-house” by a personnel measurement organization. We use the term “in-house” to refer to measures that have been developed by an organization or a test development firm, which has full proprietary control over the test’s use and distribution. In-house tests are typically constructed for a specific purpose (e.g. selecting customer service representatives), and research regarding the test’s validity and other psychometric properties is conducted and contained within that organization.

There are literally thousands of consulting/testing organizations that create and sell tests for

virtually any and every occupation. It is important for an HR professional to know that their test has been properly constructed and validated for both accuracy in selection and legal defensibility. Ideally you want to use a test that has been subject to *external* review. Most measures developed “in-house” have not been subject to rigorous external review, which means that you are relying on the testing agency to have done an appropriate job of test construction and validation. Test review agencies, such as the *Buros Institute’s Mental Measurement Yearbook*, provide external critique and review for published tests. This test review information is available online for a modest fee, but first the test has to be submitted for review. These reviews will provide key information about a test such as validity, appropriate usage, and potential adverse impact. Tests that have been externally reviewed and subject to extensive research are sometimes referred to as public domain tests, although the creators may still require a fee for its usage.

Most instruments developed “in-house” lack such external review, although the agency that created the test may provide information addressing key issues such as validity. Hiring managers should be aware of whether a test is “in-house” or public domain, and collect any information regarding the test’s validity. We recommend using tests that are subject to external review because otherwise you are placing your hiring decision and reputation in the hands of the

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testing agency. HR personnel will want to collect all the available information regarding a test's validity and appropriate usage from an external review site or from the testing agency they are using. If substantial validity information is not available for the test in question, you do not want to use that test.

Question 2: *"Is the test we use appropriate for the job in question?"* This is an obvious and simple question that requires a good bit of information to answer. Assuming your test is valid at this point, it is important that the test be applicable to the job in question. For example, one would probably not need higher mathematical ability to perform well as a truck driver, so giving a truck driving candidate a test requiring an understanding of calculus would be inappropriate. An HR manager will want the test they use to provide information that is relevant to performing the work that is required for the job in question. For legal purposes and to get the best employees, you want to be sure that the test you use is appropriate and targeted for the job in question.

A selection test must be valid and job-related for legal defensibility. In addition, you should be aware of the groups of people used to develop the norms and selection standards for your test. Are you comparing an individual's score against people who are

already successfully on the job? Is your decision making information customized to successful performers within your organization, based on industry norms, or based on a broad national sample? These are some of the things an HR manager should be aware of when looking at a report generated from an online test. An external review can also answer these questions, or again, you are relying on the testing company to be appropriately addressing this issue for you.

Question 3: *"How is the test we use supposed to be administered?"* Again, this is a question that brings about a host of concerns. Is my test being administered in a standard fashion, could job candidates inflate their ratings, is the technology gap still an issue in selection, how secure are an individual's results, and is the job candidate the actual person taking the test? Most of these concerns are a direct result of the internet and computer technology that provide us with so much convenience. The convenience is counter-balanced by a lack of security and test taking oversight. This means you may not be sure just who is taking the test, what candidates may have access to while taking the test, which individuals have access to test information, and whether the test is being administered in a consistent fashion. This requires trusting not only the testing agency for security and standardizing administration, but also that job candidates are behaving appropriately if they are taking a test off-site. A hiring manager

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should be aware of how a test is supposed to be administered and potential risks to security, consistency and bias in results.

Question 4: *“What does the information contained in the assessment report really mean?”* Computer-driven tests generally provide the hiring manager with a short written report and possibly graphs summarizing a job candidate’s results. These reports contain a good deal of information, some of which may be redundant, inaccurate, highly technical, or misleading. Keep in mind that these reports are typically generated by a computer program which simply strings together sentences based on test responses. Computer generated reports may or may not be subject to external oversight (i.e. reviewed by a testing consultant) to address potential errors and redundancy, prior to reaching the HR specialist. For example, within the state of Georgia, all computer-driven psychological testing requires oversight by a licensed psychologist, but in reality a report may not be seen by anyone before it is forwarded to the HR professional. It is important for a hiring manager to talk extensively with the testing agency to make sure they understand the test itself, the constructs being measured, what the information in the interpretive report actually means and how the information given relates to the job in question.

The hiring managers should also feel comfortable contacting the test consultants to clarify information and answer questions.

Question 5: *“Now that I have all this information, how do I go about deciding on whom to hire?”* Making the call is the bottom line result you want from the test in question. You want to have enough of the right information about a candidate, to feel comfortable hiring or not hiring them. You also need to be able to justify that decision to your superiors and to the job candidate. Most tests and testing agencies caveat their assessment reports by saying something to the effect of: “The information contained within the report should only be used as part of a larger selection process.” This is actually good advice, since testing only addresses part of the equation of a job candidate’s fit for a job. Testing should be supplemented and considered with other criteria such as experience, education, and an interview. The point we are making here is that testing provides key information, but there is more to job performance than can be tapped by a single test. Hiring managers should use tests and interpretive reports as means of gathering key job information, not as the sole criteria for selecting a job candidate.

Within this article we address five of the major issues involved in online/ computer-driven testing. These are some of the key concerns of which HR personnel should have an awareness without delving too

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deeply into the more technical and legal aspects of selection testing. There is a good deal of information that a hiring manager should have when deciding on a selection system for their organization. If using an external testing agency to facilitate selection decisions, HR personnel need to have a great deal of trust in that agency. When HR managers use an external testing agency to facilitate their selection decisions, they should develop and cultivate a relationship with the test agency's staff. In addition, we recommend using tests that have been reviewed objectively and extensively researched. Firms that create, sell and use "in-house" tests will usually provide some statistical information regarding the test's properties and utility. The statistical information provided may be accurate,

sound impressive, and be misleading all at the same time. Unless one is or has access to an expert in psychometrics, we suggest that organizations use tests that have been given favorable external reviews regarding the test's usefulness and appropriateness from an external evaluation entity. If the HR experts do have some knowledge of testing and psychometrics, they should collect as much data as is available for the test in question, particularly with regard to validity, reliability, potential bias, and adverse impact. Ideally, hiring managers will have an open and candid relationship with the testing agency personnel. HR managers may be relying on the testing agency to be using a valid, appropriate, job-related, and legally defensible test. A good working relationship between HR and test agency personnel is going to result in greater accuracy and less problems in candidate screening.

Timothy J. Rollier, M.S.

Tim Rollier received his undergraduate degree in Psychology from Columbus State University and a Master's in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Valdosta State University. He has undergone Ph.D. training and served as adjunct faculty at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Charles A. Cowart, Ph. D.

Dr. Charles "Chuck" Cowart received his Bachelor's in Psychology from the University of Alabama and completed the Master's and Doctoral programs in Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has been actively involved in consulting for the past twenty years. Currently his is a lead partner for the consulting firm of Barger, Cowart, & Kenney, LLC.