

Frequently Asked Questions about Using Assessments



Q. When and how should assessments be used?

A. Assessments should be used when they can contribute information to a selection decision or identify training/ development needs that would be difficult to gather from other sources such as interviews, reference checks, or observations of behavior or performance.

It is not recommended that assessments be used as a “stand alone” process, but rather in combination with information obtained through those other sources. In cases of hiring or promotion decisions, it is important to apply testing consistently. It would be discriminatory, for example, to test only candidates of one gender or one ethnic group. It would be discriminatory to disregard test results because “everyone really liked Joe in the interview” if other candidates are required to achieve the target score in order to be considered further.

Q. Which assessments are best?

A. The choice of an assessment instrument should be guided by the behaviors and competencies necessary for success. Prior to embarking on a testing program, it is advised to get some outside help, such as business psychologists, reputable vendors, and organizations such as MRA who provide assessment services.

Q. Are all tests valid?

A. No. There are tests available through some experienced consultants that are not validated. It is important to ask the right questions. Validity refers to how well a test measures what it is supposed to measure. Also, a test is only valid with respect to something. The claim that a specific test is “valid” means nothing unless there is a specification for what it measures and that it is relevant to the job. One test does not fit all.

Q. When making hiring decisions, wouldn't it be safer to rely on interviewing alone?


A. Researchers have looked at the effectiveness of interviewing versus testing. There is no foolproof instrument or process that will lead to perfect hiring decisions, but when valid assessments are applied consistently, they can significantly improve hiring decisions.

Why use assessments? Have you ever been faced with a recruiting, employee relations, or employee/ team development situation that centers on one of the following questions?

- How do I identify top performers before I hire them?
- Who are the best candidates for promotion?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of any given work team and how can I maximize their performance?
- How can I hire in a way that will reduce turnover?

Assessments can aid in all of the above. They help objectively measure knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and/or personality traits that may be hard to determine through an interview.

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Q. Will the use of testing serve as a “lightning rod” for discrimination complaints?

A. The basic principle of the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Procedures is that a selection procedure that has an adverse impact on the employment opportunities for members of a race, color, religion, sex, or national origin group and thus disproportionately screens them out, is unlawfully discriminatory unless the process or its component procedures have been validated in accordance with the guidelines, or the user otherwise justifies them in accordance with federal law.

Often, employers mistakenly assume this applies only to the use of testing. The guidelines define selection procedure as, “any measure, combination of measures, or procedure used as a basis for any employment decision. Selection procedures include the full range of assessment techniques from traditional paper and pencil tests, performance tests, training programs, or probationary periods, and physical, educational, and work experience requirements through informal or casual interviews and unscored application forms.” Unsystematic or biased interviews conducted by unskilled interviewers are frequently challenged.

Think of assessments as the third leg of a three-legged stool. All three legs—behavioral interviewing, reference checking, and assessments—can help support strong employment decisions.

Q. Can assessments be used to identify developmental and training needs, or even high potentials?

A. Organization can consider using a 360° assessment. A 360° or multi-rater assessment allows for input from a variety of raters offering different perspectives and insights. The raters typically include the individual being rated, the supervisor, direct reports, peers, and sometimes customers or other stakeholders.

A multi-rater assessment tends to offer less bias and a more balanced perspective. In addition, an individual may see the feedback as being more credible as it does not rely on only one rater’s observations.

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