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MANAGING YOURSELF

Ace the Assessment

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by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic



Managing Yourself

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More employers are using tests as part of the hiring process. Here's how to prepare for them. *by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic*

If you thought your test-taking days ended when you left school, think again. Recent research shows that about 76% of organizations with more than 100 employees rely on assessment tools such as aptitude and personality tests for external hiring. That figure is expected to climb to 88% over the next few years. We're not talking just about screening for junior recruits. The more senior the role, the more likely the employer is to use assessments to identify candidates with the right traits and abilities. Global estimates suggest that tests are used for 72% of middle management positions and up to 80% of senior roles, compared with 59% of entry-level positions. So even if you've never taken an assessment, chances are you'll have to in your next job search.

How can you get better at taking these tests so that they're opportunities to shine instead of stumbling blocks in your career? After 15 years of studying assessments and developing

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more than 100 of them for organizations, I can tell you there's no easy way to game well-designed tools. Companies use them to identify people with the traits and skills required for particular jobs, and new hires who have misrepresented themselves are quickly found out.

That said, if you're an informed test taker, you'll be more likely to showcase your best self. You'll also be in a better position to evaluate whether the job is right for you, just as potential employers are evaluating whether you are right for the job.

Organizations take these tests seriously, so you should, too. Here's what you need to know about the most common types and how companies are using them.

What Assessments Measure

Prehire assessments have been around at least since the Han dynasty in the third century. Chinese imperial leaders used them to gauge knowledge, intellect, and moral integrity when selecting civil servants. Modern personality and intelligence tests were introduced in the United States and Europe during World War I, to aid in military selection, and after World War II companies started adopting them to screen applicants.

Today employers like assessments because they greatly reduce the time and cost of recruiting and hiring. Tests also prevent interviewers from accepting or rejecting candidates on the basis of conscious or unconscious biases. And because tests can be given remotely and scored electronically, they widen the pool of candidates.

Most important, valid tests help companies measure three critical elements of success on the job: competence, work ethic, and emotional intelligence. Though employers still look for evidence of those qualities in résumés, reference checks, and

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interviews, they need a fuller picture to make smart hires. Research shows that tests for such traits are much better predictors of performance than are years of experience or education—the sort of data that candidates typically highlight in their applications.

Let's look at the three traits employers are testing for.

Competence. Competence is usually measured with aptitude tests, which consist of questions or problems (with objectively correct answers) designed to assess raw reasoning power. Ranging from generic IQ assessments to tests of specific abilities or skills, aptitude tests are used to evaluate what you know, what you can do, or what you're able to learn. The most common types measure verbal, numerical, abstract, or logical thinking. (For example, "True or false: $6/8 + 6/8 = 1.25 + 2/8$." Or "Castle is to aristocrat as sewer is to ____.") For employers they are a great complement to résumés, especially when candidates are too junior, too similar, or too different to be compared on experience.

The key thing to remember about aptitude tests is that employers rely on them merely to establish that you have sufficient reasoning and learning skills. In most cases you

don't need to be a top scorer; you just need to meet a baseline.

In recent years employers have also evaluated competence with situational judgment tests (SJTs). Like aptitude tests, SJTs present problems to solve, but the problems don't have objectively correct answers. Instead, experts or judges determine which answers are most and least desirable. These tests are typically untimed and focus more on tacit knowledge or practical know-how than on reasoning performance. And their content is more explicitly connected to a particular job role than is the content of traditional aptitude tests. (See the sample question below.)

When you're confronted with an SJT, think carefully about the culture of the company that's administering it—just as you would to prepare for an interview in which you might be expected to answer scenario-based questions.

Work ethic. Most companies seek employees who are ambitious, reliable, and trustworthy. These

TESTING FOR COMPETENCE

SAMPLE QUESTION

Imagine that you're a hotel concierge, and a guest asks you to make a dinner reservation at a specific restaurant. You know the place fairly well, and previous guests have given you negative feedback about it. But this guest seems very excited about the prospect of eating there and has not asked for your opinion. What do you do?

- A.** Congratulate the guest on his or her choice and make the booking.
- B.** Make the booking without providing your opinion.
- C.** Offer a couple of alternatives, explaining that they are probably better.
- D.** Share your opinion and say that several guests have been disappointed with the restaurant.
- E.** Pretend the restaurant is fully booked and offer to find an alternative.

Options C and D seem wiser than A and B (you don't want your guest to be unhappy); E is dishonest and a bit extreme. But the "right" answer may actually differ from hotel to hotel; it will be whatever the establishment's top-performing employees would do.

TESTING FOR WORK ETHIC

SAMPLE QUESTION

Choose the most accurate statement below.

- A. It is important for me to excel at everything I do.
- B. I am good at everything I do.
- C. If you want to be successful, you can't always put others' needs first.

People who select B tend to be narcissistic—research shows that narcissists don't hesitate to reveal themselves in assessments. Those who select C are likely to be overly ambitious. (If that seems obvious, you probably don't fall into either camp.) Statement A captures a healthy degree of ambition.

elements of work ethic determine not only whether people will get things done but also whether they'll fit in with the organization's culture and collaborate well. Self-report questionnaires, such as personality tests, are often used to evaluate those qualities by revealing typical patterns of behavior. They might, as in the sample question above, give you a sense of which people can manage the tension between getting ahead and getting along—an ability most employers are looking for.

I say “most” because some organizations are much more accepting of extreme ambition than others. For example, a few years ago I helped Reckitt Benckiser, a multinational consumer goods company, develop an immersive personality test designed to attract candidates who were so “insanely driven” that they'd often act in bold and somewhat antisocial ways. This is a great reminder that organizations, and even departments within them, have their own profiles for success.

Emotional intelligence. Ever since the psychologist Daniel Goleman popularized the concept, employers have been paying a great deal of attention to emotional intelligence, and rightly so. Many psychological studies demonstrate that EI is linked to overall job performance, entrepreneurial potential, and leadership talent. Further, its importance is not confined to specific roles.

Employers tend to assess EI through face-to-face interviews, but increasingly they also use psychological tests. Most of these look like self-report personality tests, but they specifically gauge interpersonal and intrapersonal tendencies. Candidates might be asked whether they find other people's sadness contagious, for instance, and whether they tend to avoid upsetting situations. Their responses help illuminate how empathetic and self-aware they are.

EI can also be evaluated through SJTs. Scenarios might involve making decisions under pressure or displaying appropriate social etiquette. An extreme example is Heineken's use of real-world SJTs in interviews, which confront candidates with the unexpected or the uncomfortable (handshakes that turn into hand-holding, for instance, or an interviewer who pretends to pass out) to test their resilience, people skills, and team spirit.

Some employers are starting to assess EI with “performance tasks.” Like IQ or aptitude tests, these tasks, such as the “eye test,” below, present problems to solve, but the decision maker determines which answers are best. (The eye test is modeled on questions developed by Simon Baron-Cohen, the director of the University

of Cambridge's Autism Research Centre. The other sample questions are in the public domain.)

Though psychological assessments and other forms of EI testing might seem soft or silly, they give organizations a window into candidates' emotional literacy and social insight—qualities that are critical in many roles and organizational cultures.

Mastering the Tests

Now that you understand the types of tests and what employers hope to learn from them, I'd like to offer some general advice about how to improve your performance.

Everyone benefits when assessments reflect what people can do and what they're like. Even a candidate who desperately wants a job will regret getting one that's a bad fit. Still, it pays to do as well as you can. Here's how to set yourself up for success without compromising accuracy.

Practice. Just as sample questions and prep courses help students raise their scores on college entry exams such as the SAT, assessment practice can give you an edge in your job search. It's estimated that up to half of employment candidates engage in some sort of preparation. And for good reason: It's not uncommon for people to increase their aptitude test scores by about 20% through practice.

The practice book for the GRE is an excellent resource for sharpening your verbal, numerical, and logical reasoning. You can also find questions from psychological tests, SJTs, and other types of assessments online.

A review of 50 scientific studies with more than 130,000 participants shows that practice boosts performance on pretty much any kind of test, for three reasons. First, it decreases anxiety. As you'd imagine, the more trial runs you've had, the more confident and calm you'll be when

TESTING FOR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

SAMPLE QUESTION

How would you describe the person in the photo below?



- A. Angry
- B. Panicked
- C. Mischievous
- D. Passionate

The expression is meant to be “panicked,” and by choosing that response you'll show that you're attuned to body language, which is critical to EI. But you can see the subjective element here—we're looking at a photograph of an actor's portrayal. Even so, academic studies suggest that questions like this can be effective complements to other kinds of tests.

The Traits Employers Measure

COMPETENCE	WORK ETHIC	EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
Expertise Experience Trainability	Reliability Ambition Integrity	Self-management Social skills Political skills
THE TOOLS THEY USE		
Résumés Aptitude tests Situational judgment tests	Personality tests References Peer evaluations Values tests	Interviews Personality tests Situational judgment tests Performance tasks

taking a high-stakes test, because the various formats and questions, as well as the entire experience, will seem more familiar. You'll also discover what you don't know, so you can brush up and feel more prepared. Second, practice makes proven test-taking strategies, such as skipping and revisiting difficult questions, come more naturally when the pressure is on. You'll learn to ignore irrelevant information and make fewer errors in interpretation. And third, repeated test taking can help you develop the very qualities that employers measure. Neuroscientific evidence suggests that brain-training programs, including skill-based video games, can enhance your focus and your ability to detect patterns—skills that most aptitude testing is designed to assess.

Of course, practice is more effective if you know precisely what type of test your prospective employer uses. Ask the recruiter or anyone you know who works at or has interviewed with the company. Recruiters get paid for placing candidates, and current employees often get paid for referrals, so both should be motivated to help you.

Attend to logistics. Research shows that personality, circadian rhythms, and stimulants interact to affect performance. People who are agreeable and conscientious, for example, are likely to be better

test takers in the morning and so should avoid caffeine at that time, when they're naturally firing on all cylinders. The reverse is true for extroverted, creative people: They may need coffee to perform well in the morning but can be hindered by it in the afternoon, when they're already at their best. So if you have any control over when you take a test, choose wisely. Consider what time of day you are most focused and be careful about the food and drink you consume.

Be yourself, within reason.

This advice applies especially to personality and psychological assessments. Don't lie—you'll just improve your chances of landing a job that's not an appropriate fit. Good tests have anticheating features that detect anomalous or fake responses, and smart interviewers are quick to pick up discrepancies between test scores and real-world behaviors. However, when taking assessments, you can and should try to live up to your most ardent supporters' image of you.

For instance, in most cases you would do well to portray yourself as driven, but not to the point of undermining others or behaving unethically. Savvy employers tend to look for moderately high scores on ambition, or a combination of high ambition and altruism. This approach is consistent with studies showing


that "too much of a good thing" often has negative consequences.

Most employers map their assessments to their "competency models." That is, they note the qualities, skills, and values of their high performers and then measure those with validated tools. You can find out what traits organizations are looking for (global mindset, good judgment, resilience, and so on) by visiting their websites and reading their statements of values and purpose. That will give you a broad sense of the culture—and of how the "real" you might fare—before you even apply for a position.

BECAUSE COMPANIES find assessments so valuable in their hiring efforts, it's important to be prepared for any type that might be thrown at you. Most prehire tests are traditional self-report questionnaires, but technology is ushering in a new crop of tools. For instance, some employers are offering "gamified" tests online (complete with points and badges) in order to expand the applicant pool. They're also using algorithms to translate social media activity into an estimate of potential or fit. There's still work to be done to address validity and privacy issues, but you should expect more and more companies to use these innovative methods.

As you gear up to take a prehire assessment, remember that you're not just jumping through hoops for the employer's benefit. Tests can provide clues about an organization—how things work there, how success is defined, which traits matter most. You're getting a peek at expectations, which is invaluable in any job search. ♥

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