

# Critically evaluate the use of personality assessment in work settings

[Psychology](#), [Personality](#)



Critically Evaluate The Use Of Personality Assessment In Work Settings. What Are The Important Professional Issues? Abstract Personality tests are used in a work setting, predominantly for the purpose of recruitment and selection. A number of professional issues exist around the use of personality tests in this setting, and practitioners should be clear of the possible flaws involved in the use of personality tests. The literature has highlighted concerns with the faking of personality tests. Individuals faking tests can mean those who obtain the highest scores are the ones who are recruited.

This should be considered where personality tests are used for recruiting the top candidates as opposed to being used for removing the least suitable candidates. The validity of personality tests has to be considered when being used for selection purpose. A high face validity of tests can increase the likelihood of faking tests; yet low face validity can result in the personality tests being rejected by candidates. Practitioners have to also take into account a number of ethical issues before using personality tests in a work setting.

Key Words: Personality testing; Faking; Validity; Recruitment; Ethics.

Introduction Personality tests are used in a work setting at the stage of recruitment, and also once people are within a job, to assess their working preferences. Personality traits have been found to be predictive of a number of outcomes, ranging from health behaviours to task performance (Hough & Oswald, 2008). Work specific factors related to personality types include Job Performance, Work Motivation, Leadership and Adaptability (Morgeson et al. , 2007). Using the Big Five personality traits, Judge et al. (2001) found that

Conscientiousness, significantly predicts job performance across different organisational settings, and Emotional stability also predicts overall Job Performance. Organisations wish to recruit the candidates who show the greatest probability of performing well in the role and those who are going to benefit the most from the use of all of the training opportunities provided by the organisation (Shum, O’Gorman & Myors, 2006: 147). However, the use of personality assessments can be debated, and a number of factors have to be considered before using personality tests to make important decisions about individuals’ careers.

The focus of this essay is on the use of personality assessment in organisations, primarily in recruitment and selection, and the issues practitioners need to be aware of before using personality assessments. Faking Faking of personality tests is been described by terms such as “ response distortion, impression management, social desirability, displaying unlikely virtues, and self-enhancement” (Griffin, Chmielowski & Yoshita, 2007). The many definitions may account for the substantial number of published articles relating to the faking of personality tests (Morgeson et al. , 2007).

Researchers have suggested that it should be expected that individuals will give inaccurate responses in self-report tests due to the value attached to the outcome (Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007). However, there is little consensus in the research, about the frequency of faking, or how to address the issue. As selection is often carried out in a top-down approach, where those who perform in the top 5-10% are selected to progress (Arthur, Woehr,

Graziano, 2001), the possibility of candidates faking personality tests should be a serious consideration for practitioners, otherwise those who have falsely represented themselves will be selected.

Where it is obvious what is being tested in self-report questionnaires, there is likely to be a greater opportunity to fake responses. The face validity of questionnaires is an important issue, as it is likely to contribute to faking. Furnham & Drakeley (2000) found that managers tend to use personality tests with high face validity, due to concerns about having to rationalise the use of the test to participants. Alternatively, using low face validity personality tests could mean the participants reject the appropriateness of the test, and do not fully engage with it (Kline, 2000: 430).

However, where face validity of personality tests is high, the accuracy of personality tests scores can be distorted by individuals who assume they know what the “best response” is, and give an extreme rating. Arthur et al. , (2001) suggest that it is easy to assume the extreme scores on a scale are the most or least desired, due to the wording of questions. Ironically, ‘fakers’ may overrate themselves and appear to be inappropriate for a role.

For example, conscientiousness has been found to be easier to fake than other personality traits such as “Openness to Experiences” (Griffin, Hesketh & Grayson, 2004); therefore individual who rate themselves to be overly Conscientious may be restrained by rules and be unsuitable for the position. Practitioners have to be aware of the limitations of high face validity and the likelihood of faked responses (Kline 2000: 255). Much of the research around faking of personality tests has been lab-based, and carried out on students

(Judge et al. 2008), therefore the question as to whether they do cheat in reality needs to be examined (Griffin, Chmielowski & Yoshita, 2007). Hogan et al. ,(2007) looked at responses to personality tests in the application process for a customer service role, and compared responses given at two stages by 5, 266 applicants, over a six month interval. Hogan et al. , suggested that if individuals do fake personality tests at the recruitment stage, they are most likely to do so once they have been rejected from the job on a previous occasion. The findings indicated little difference in the personality measures from time one and time two.

These findings would suggest that not all applicants attempt to fake in actual recruitment settings. However, findings by Griffin et al. ,(2007) indicated that some participants do fake their personality when applying to jobs, and this has an impact on the rank order of scores. A professional implication of these findings is that practitioners have to be cautious when interpreting personality scores, but should not be cynical by disregarding personality measures totally. As well as being aware of issues around faking, practitioners should be aware of the methods used to reduce or identify faking.

A proactive method used included the use of forced-choice, or ipsative inventories, in which neither option is more socially desirable than the other. An alternative option is to use instructional warnings against faking. A reactive method for “ fixing” faking can be the use of social desirability scales or a lie scale within the inventory which indicate if a respondent is faking. However, there is little evidence supporting the effectiveness of

strategies such as instructional warnings and forced choice item format (Hogan et al. , 2007), and social desirability questions are likely to be more transparent in their purpose, and therefore prone to being faked (Griffin et al. , 2007). With all of the issues surrounding faking of personality tests, it has been argued that instead of using the tests as a method of recruiting the “ best” performers on the test, there is actually a greater benefit in using the measures as a form of rejecting the poorest performers when using tests to “ select out” (Mueller- Hanson, Heggstad & Thornton, 2003). Using personality tests for selecting out applicants would allow those who have performed poorly, and those who have faked but not been successful in obtaining the benchmark score, to be rejected.

**Validity** In the past decade there has been considerable evidence in the academic literature for the support of personality tests for selection, but there have been concerns about the predictive validity of personality tests relating to work related behaviour (Meyer et al. , 2001). However, practitioners continued to use personality measures for selection purpose (Bartram, 2004), disregarding the academic arguments. Critics often highlight the “ low” validity scores of the best predictor in the Big Five with Job Performance, Conscientiousness ( $r = 0.23$ ; Judge et al. 2008), whereas other methods of assessment, such as the use of General Mental Ability tests which have been found to have a predictive validity of  $r = 0.51$  (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). However, the validity score of Conscientiousness should not be dismissed. Meyer et al. , (2001) identified a large number of medical and psychological interventions, which produce correlations of approximately .15 to .30, are commonly accepted by professionals, such as taking regular

aspirin to reduce risk of heart attacks. It can be argued that academics are actually focussing on a “ gold standard” score of validity (Judge et al. 2008), and not looking at the benefits of other interventions that have similar predictive validities. Schmidt & Hunter (1998) suggest that using a combination of measures with relatively low validity on their own, when combined would be more than sufficient for use in recruiting, for example combining a conscientiousness tests, work sample tests and a job knowledge tests. Practitioners should have a clear understanding of the criterion validity of personality measures in relationship to job performance, and be aware of large degree of unaccountable variance that can occur.

There is no guarantee that an individual who scores highly on a personality measure will be successful in their role, and an individual’s skills and ability are likely to account for a large part of their performance in the role (Shum et al. , 2006: 161). Ethics It is important that ethical issues are taken into consideration when using personality measures in a work setting. First of all, organisations have to be aware of the qualifications required by the individual administering the personality tests and interpreting them.

In the UK, the British Psychological Society sets a requisite standard through the attainment of Level A & Level B qualifications in order to administer and interpret both ability and personality tests. However, not all individuals who administer tests are responsible for interpreting the data, therefore the those who are administering the test should obtain the Occupational Test Administration qualification (British Psychological Society, 2000). Insufficient

training on the use of a personality measure can result in misinterpretation of the results and render the test useless.

Where individuals have not been provided with sufficient training to administer tests, there is the possibility of providing inconsistent instructions to participants, and leading to errors or biases in the results (Kline, 2000: 9). An issue that ties in with the Level B training is that practitioners are trained to use one specific test, therefore they may only ever use this one test, and not take into consideration the appropriateness of the test they are using for the specific needs of the organisation. Organisations need to be aware of the issues around the feedback they provide to individuals who take part in personality measures.

How feedback is interpreted by individuals should be considered, and whether they will understand the meaning of the scores (Kline, 2000: 431). Where a candidate completes a personality test, but does not score at the top of the group, they may feel they are not suitable for the organisation, or the type of role they are applying for. The implications of what is reported back to the candidates can result in an individual making major decisions about the type of role they apply for in the future, should they be told that they scored significantly “poorly” in the personality test (Toplis, Dulewicz & Fletcher, 2005: 37).

Practitioners should clearly explain the reason for the personality measures used, and ensure the feedback they provide will not have a negative impact on the individual. An important consideration for practitioners should be the possible biases held within personality tests, which can be biased towards a



gender, race, social class or disability. These factors can influence the score of a personality test, and can mask actual scores (British Psychological Society, 2000). However, there is evidence to suggest that the use of personality measures balances out the biases of ability tests, when comparing different racial groups.

Therefore the combined use of ability and personality tests can be beneficial (Bartram, 2004). When testing individuals with disabilities, factors such as the time required, the environment being tested in, and the method of testing, all have to be considered to ensure the testing process is fair (Toplis, Dulewicz & Fletcher, 2005: 42). Conclusion Researchers have identified clear benefits in using personality measures in a work related environment, especially when recruiting to a post.

However, the use of personality assessment should be considered as a supplementary method of selection into a role, due to the number of possible factors that can influence the results of a personality test. It is clear that faking of tests is a well researched area, however, little consensus exists with how to best address the possibility that individuals will fake a test that has a value attached to the outcome (Hogan et al. , 2007). One possible solution is to use the tests as a form of selecting out those who are in the lowest percentile (Mueller-Hanson et al. 2003), and using additional measures to support the selection of those who perform in the upper percentile. The concerns about the criterion validity of personality measures and job performance have raised doubts about the suitability of personality assessments. When comparing single personality traits with alternative

methods of assessment for their predictive validity, it is clear that alternative methods are stronger predictors of work related behaviours (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), however, personality measures are still considered reliable measures, therefore should be used to supplement alternative methods or assessment.

It is clear that the ethical implications of using personality assessments are an important factor, as they can influence the outcome of the tests as well as the responses of the participants. If practitioners do not follow the correct procedures by providing adequate instructions and ensuring standardised conditions, it is likely that individuals will reject the tests (Kline, 2000: 9). It is also important to consider the effects of taking a personality assessment, and then knowing you failed to meet the cut off point.

The way in which feedback is given can have detrimental effects of individuals therefore the issue should be approached with caution (Toplis et al, 2005: 37). In conclusion, there are a number of issues that need to be considered when using personality assessments in a work setting. The benefit of gauging an individual's behaviour through assessing their personality is clear, however, practitioners should be aware of the flaws in personality assessment, and be aware of alternative forms of assessment when selecting individuals for a job, to supplement personality assessments.

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