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## Psychometric Testing on Interview Day Interviewers Dig Deep to Find the Real You

20 JUNE 2003

Twenty years ago I had the worst interview of my life. It was the first time that I had ever been face-to-face with what is now called "psychometric testing," a practice that is increasingly being used by interviewing companies.

Today's employers want to feel as secure about you as possible before taking the leap and making an offer. While your background may fit the job specifications perfectly, many companies believe that they don't truly know you until you have

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been through a battery of tests that look for personality characteristics and/or forecast interpersonal difficulties. Some of these tests even try to measure problem-solving ability and determine whether you have the potential to supervise others. Companies that use these interview tools take the philosophy that you are *not* the contents of your CV or resume; they believe that lists of lab skills and techniques don't truly reflect the real you.

### **My Experience With Psychometric Testing**

In my case, I had set up an interview at a firm where I had a friend in a key role who assured me that I was an excellent fit for the position. I really did my homework by investigating the company and preparing for the interview. That's why I was so surprised when the hiring manager interrupted our series of personal meetings to say that I had an appointment scheduled with the company's "psychologist consultant." Suddenly I was being driven off-site in a cab and taken to this consultant's office. Everyone

assured me that it was only because the firm was very interested in me that it took this step.

The consultant told me how the company wanted to assure a match with its internal culture. To that end, he had developed a series of tests that would help the firm determine if there was a fit. I remember sitting down with a stack of paperwork, some number 2 pencils, and a lousy attitude. Things went along OK for a time until he started showing me some of those ink-blot pictures and doing word associations. "Too weird," I thought. At that point, although I wasn't really making a conscious decision, I believe that I gave up on the interview. Needless to say, I didn't get the job offer.

Should my friend have warned me about the use of psychometric testing at the company? I wish he had, but in reality I couldn't have done anything with that information. You can't prepare for this type of test with the traditional pre-interview research. However, getting familiar with the type of questions used in psychometric testing can indeed make you more comfortable when you are suddenly thrust into the process, pencil in hand.

Most importantly, knowing that these kinds of interviews are out there and developing an open attitude toward this testing will mean that you won't suffer the shock that I did when you encounter it. After all, the fewer surprises on interview day, the better!

### **Advice From the Expert**

Philip Carter is the co-author of an excellent new release from Wiley, *More Psychometric Testing*<sup>\*</sup>; he and Ken

Russell also wrote the original 2001 release in this series called *Psychometric Testing: 1000 Ways to Assess Your Personality, Creativity, Intelligence and Lateral Thinking*. Carter is passionate about the value of these tests to the employer, and in my interview with him he offered readers some excellent tips on how to deal with the whole practice of testing during interviews.

"It is important for your readers to realize the cost of hiring," Carter began. "There is a tremendous expense to recruitment and the initial hiring process. Anything that an employer can do to assure that the fit is a good one is generally considered worth doing."

My personal feeling, which I expressed in my chat with Carter, is that while it may be to the employer's advantage to reduce risk in this way, I still have trouble figuring out why I need to share my fear of traffic jams (see sidebar). I told him that many of these tests go way over the border into unnecessary personal information that many people may find offensive, as I did.

"The process shouldn't be perceived negatively. Applicants should take the positive view that this form of testing gives them the opportunity to demonstrate to the employer that they are the best person for the job," Carter cautioned.

"Besides, an organization will not base its entire decision on ... an individual's test results. Psychometric testing is a part of the selection process, and it is not a substitute for interviewing. It works best when it is combined with an in-depth personal interview."

## The Questions They Pop

Culled from a variety of sources, here are some of the questions that can be asked during psychometric tests given by employers to identify personality traits or creativity in their prospective recruits.

*From "How Well Do You Cope Under Pressure . . ."*

How important to you is the need to succeed?

- a) Quite important
- b) Very important
- c) It is not something I think about a great deal

Does working to deadlines give you a buzz?

- a) No, but working to deadlines is a necessary evil most of us have to cope with
- b) No. I find working to deadlines quite a worry and prefer to set my own pace
- c) Yes, I believe that I work well under pressure

You are sitting in a traffic jam. Which of the following is likely to be your strongest feeling?

- a) Anger
- b) Frustration
- c) Boredom

*From "Asking for What You Want . . ."*

Choose the statement that is most like you as #1, and

rank them through #4, which is least like you:

- a) I try to convey the right sort of body language whenever I ask for something
- b) When I ask I need to be clear about my requirements and stick to my guns
- c) If you wait until the time is right before asking you could be waiting forever
- d) I feel it is right to wait until the time is right before asking

*From "Do You Have the Secret to Success?"*

In each of the following, choose from a scale of 1-5 to show those you most agree with, or which are most applicable to you. Choose just one number for each (5 is most like you, 1 is least like you, etc.):

- a) I can be ruthless when it comes to getting what I want
 

5	4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---	---
- b) I find it easy to focus my mind on one subject for very long periods of time
 

5	4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---	---
- c) Perfection is an impossible ideal
 

5	4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---	---
- d) I would be prepared to give up my favorite hobby, even though I love it dearly, if it meant success in my chosen career
 

5	4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---	---

Later in the month, a department head at a major university told me about two equally qualified graduate students who had interviewed for jobs at one of America's largest and best-known companies, a software firm. Both of these new Ph.D. graduates were given a large geometric puzzle with a zillion pieces, and they were asked to solve it in 10 minutes. They were timed, and the pressure was intense. One of these new Ph.D.s reported that he was sweating all over the desk and that he made very little progress on the puzzle. He didn't get the job offer. The other Ph.D. got an offer and is now at work at the company. But he didn't solve the puzzle either.

This successful Ph.D. took the same analytical approach that he gave his science. He spent a few minutes looking at the puzzle from a variety of angles and then set it down in front of him. He told the interviewer that he could solve it but that it would take about an hour. He then proceeded to tell that person about the reasoning process that he would use to solve it. It turns out that this is all they were hoping to learn.

### **Why You Cannot Prepare for Psychometric Testing**

I asked Carter if there is a way to cram for the testing, in order to assure a better result. After all, many of our readers are used to studying for exams. Is there a way to do this for the interview testing?

"At all times, applicants need to follow the instructions and be entirely truthful in their responses," he cautioned.

"Cramming for a test would imply that there is one correct answer to these questions. That isn't usually the case.

Whenever you are faced with a personality questionnaire, it is important to answer the questions truthfully, because an

attempt to guess the answer that you think your employer wants to hear has every chance of being spotted. When the tests are analyzed, your manipulation will certainly come to light."

As Carter went on to describe how many tests guard against manipulation by posing the same question more than once but in different ways, I realized that this is most likely why I didn't get that job offer many years ago. I wanted that job so badly that each time I looked at a question, I tried to determine what the employer was trying to get at. The secret to psychometric testing, as it turns out, is that the person who answers the questions entirely truthfully has a much better chance at the job than the sharpie who thinks he or she can figure the thing out!

### **In Conclusion--A Very Broad Range of Testing**

As you can see from the sidebar, a series of examples listed in *More Psychometric Testing*, these tests are so broad in scope that there really isn't a lot of common ground. Some are personality tests, some are math- and numbers-related, and others are attempts to measure your creativity. They are as varied as the types of employers using them.

So above all, if you run into any kind of psychometric testing on your next interview, you'll now know to answer the questions as truthfully as possible and to avoid the temptation to try thinking like your interviewer. This is not the time to be creative. Unlike a lot of creative thinking, this time it won't win you a job offer.

\* Philip Carter and Ken Russell, *More Psychometric Testing*

(Wiley, West Sussex, U.K., 2003).

*Author Philip Carter has an interesting personal home page, with a variety of IQ and personality tests. Visit him at <http://www.knowl.demon.co.uk>.*

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