



Who Are You? Assessing Employee Skill Sets Through Personality Tests

Insights

7.02.20

In *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek says “The ability of a group of people to do remarkable things hinges on how well those people pull together as a team.” And anyone who has managed employees can appreciate that varying management techniques is a necessity when working with individuals from diverse backgrounds who have varying personalities, strengths, and weaknesses.

The need for varied leadership responses has only been amplified in recent months as employees have experienced and expressed increased stress response due to COVID-19, layoffs, and other crises. Employers may turn to personality assessments as a guide for effective management techniques for their employee population to help facilitate a more inclusive and productive workforce.

Similarly, as employers across the globe begin re-hiring staff at a time of high unemployment rates, personality tests may serve as an attractive tool to help weed through candidates. As with any creative tool, however, the use of personality assessments for potential or current employees can carry risks.

Found Out About You: Widely-Used Personality Tests

There are several different types of personality assessments that have been used in the workplace, but not all were developed for that purpose. Some well-known personality assessments include:

- **The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI).** The MMPI was initially developed in the 1930s as a clinical tool to test psychiatric patients but was modified in 1989 to moderate its content. Evaluating scales on defensiveness, hypochondriasis, depression, conversion hysteria, psychopathic deviate, masculinity-femininity, paranoia, pschasthenia, schizophrenia, hypomania, and social introversion, the MMPI and similar tests have sometimes been used in the security context.
- **The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).** Based on Carl Jung’s theories, the MBTI identifies 16 personality types based on four facets of personality, each with two distinct preferences: extroversion (E) versus introversion (I); sensing (S) versus intuition (N); thinking (T) versus feeling (F); and judgment (J) versus perception (P). Workplaces, schools, and other organizations are often attracted to the “different-not-better” nature of the MBTI’s sixteen personalities. However, this test is widely discredited in psychology circles, in part because it assumes

either/or dichotomies (introverted *or* extroverted) where individuals may fall closer to the center of each personality facet.

- **The Big Five or Five Factor Model.** This model was developed in the 1950s and identifies where an individual falls on a spectrum for five different personality traits: (1) emotional stability (or neuroticism); (2) extraversion; (3) openness; (4) agreeableness; and (5) conscientiousness. Several different commercial personality tests use this model as the base.

Take Me On: Personality Testing as a Means to Assess Soft Skills for Positions

Personality assessments can be an attractive tool at the employee application stage to narrow candidates down based on “soft skills” required for different positions before the interview stage. In an ideal world, a personality assessment would identify strong candidates without implicit human biases by helping to center the focus of the search on the requisite traits for a specific position.

Managers of current employees could also potentially benefit from personality assessments of their teams. Managers who better understand communication and appreciation styles can better tailor their communications, directives, and conflict resolution plans. A well-tailored management style can improve efficiency and retention.

Danger Zone: Risks Of Personality Testing In The Workplace Setting

Using personality assessments in the workplace does not come without risk, however. With tests intended for clinical settings — as opposed to the workplace — the assessment results could infringe on candidates’ and employees’ medical privacy as it relates to their mental health. Utilization of a test that has not been validated can lead to potential claims of disparate impact discrimination on different protected groups.

Once Bitten, Twice Shy: Best Practices

To avoid legal pitfalls with the utilization of personality assessments, employers should be mindful of these best practices:

- Identify the business goals you want to achieve. In order for a test to be lawful under anti-discrimination laws, it must be both job-related and consistent with business necessity. What end are you hoping to achieve with the assessment, and how will it help you get there?
- Identify the test that best matches your objectives. Once you know what you want to achieve, the data should support use of a particular assessment for that purpose. A personality assessment can be lawful if data shows that the test either (1) is predictive of work behavior or (2) measures the degree to which applicants have identifiable characteristics deemed important for successful job performance.
- Use professionally developed assessments. It is critical to ensure that any personality assessments used in the workplace have been validated against having a disparate impact. In other words, the test should not benefit members of one protected category over another when identifying the key traits desirable for the position. Employers must be sure to verify this characteristic of a test *before* using it. To discard test results after the fact because you fear they

characteristic of a test *before* using it. To discard test results after the fact because you fear they had a disparate impact on one or more protected categories could be considered a discriminatory act.

- Apply fairly and use in conjunction with other criteria. While perhaps an obvious point, a personality assessment should not be the only criteria used in personnel decisions. When making hiring or promotion decisions, you should evaluate the weight of personality assessments relative to other criteria and data and treat each applicant fairly
- Evaluate effectiveness. Once you have employed individuals that were revealed as strong candidates based on personality assessments, evaluate whether or not you agree. Do those employees exhibit the traits you sought? And how did that impact their performance and the business?
- Consult with counsel before rolling out any testing program. In order to ensure that your plans conform with all applicable federal, state, and local laws, you will want to partner with your employment attorney to ensure you have covered all necessary ground.

As with any tool, the utility of personality assessments should be weighed against the risks. But used with the correct protections in place, you may find you've built a better stronger team.

Related People



Megan E. Walker

Partner

858.597.9611

Email