

## Beyond Psychometrics

The internet is making rapid, radical and exciting changes to psychometric testing. After over a century, the sedate progress of traditional psychometrics has quite suddenly got into gear and screeched off the starting grid. Development in this field is now being driven by the internet rather than by the adaptation of instruments designed as print publication for face-to-face use. The web obviously influences the end user logistics of test administration, scoring and reporting, but it completely transforms the development side too; data collection, item development, validity and reliability research, and other language translations. The implications of all this are immense.

New technology has a clear need for specialists. Does WYSIWYG ring any bells for you? or Wang? or Wordstar? If you were around at the birth of the personal computer, you will know that to master the emerging word processing technology was a major achievement negotiated only by the intrepid few. In this world without Windows, DOS - typical of the operating systems of the day - was completely impenetrable to mere mortals. Windows brought an end to all that. Today my 4 year old and my 6 year old will be playing on the CBeebies website, emailing their friends or writing stories in Word. Computers have made the journey from impenetrable technology to domestic commodity – no longer an of experts only domain. Only a tiny minority know or even care how they work.

This is the route for all successful technology. Cars, fridges, digital cameras, washing machines and a hundred and one other household gadgets simply deliver what is required of them. They have been transformed from unmanageable technology to user-friendly commodity. This is a consumer world where to know how things work is positively eccentric.

Psychometric technology has been around for well over 100 years and, courtesy of the internet, it too is now set to make the transition to high utility, user friendly commodity. In the next few years you will see the blossoming of a fabulous range of internet bred, psychometrically powered products in which, like the examples above, the driving technology is kept firmly out of sight.

The explanation for this is that psychometric technology is now both reliable and consensual. Like the petrol engine, there has been little fundamental change for many decades. The consensus about ability testing goes back to the post Second World War years. Large scale research in the late 1980s did much the same for personality testing. The hallmark of the new era of assessment products will be accessibility. They will abandon the mystique, mumbo-jumbo and psychobabble of the past, deliver in the language of the workplace, address specific questions and issues, be highly accessible and user friendly. Because the new expert systems will put interpretation onto the same rigorous basis as the assessment itself, they will also be fairer and more accountable than ever before. The entire process will be opened up and democratised because, as with

your fridge and your plasma screen TV, you won't need to know how they work. This would be a huge plus for countless small businesses who cannot afford training in psychometrics or consultants to do the job for them.

Case study:

A pilot talent management project within HMCE during the Summer of 2005 illustrates the way things are going. The whole thrust of this project was accessibility – creating wider opportunities for talent to emerge in a culture where seniority may seem the most likely route to advancement.

Drawing from online questionnaire responses, project participant's were matched to an 'ideal' leadership profile expressed in terms of HMCE competency descriptions. Ratings for participants were produced for each of the seven HMCE competencies. Any discrepancies were signalled as 'possible concerns' so that they could be considered alongside other sources of available information. A one page 'sifting' report was generated in real time.

This project combined ease of access and logistic simplicity with compatibility with the client's own terms of reference. The psychometrics were there to underpin the process and to provide the precision, but the language was entirely that of HMCE and its competency framework.

The use of mathematical algorithms to model the expert interpretation of candidate responses, generated competency ratings that were finely incremented, normally distributed, had excellent measurement characteristics and correlated well with measures of performance. However, they were expressed in work-place language that addressed a specific organisational issue. Since competency ratings were, in effect, carried out by an 'expert system' rather than by the intuition and insight of a practitioner, they were absolutely consistent, accountable and open to scrutiny.

Matching profiles:

Staff selection decisions are always based on matching profiles against some kind of model or ideal. Psychometrics certainly provides the most objective way of measuring abilities and personality characteristics. But everyday language and judgements about other people long precede psychometrics. The thoughts and intuitions of decision makers is competency based. The benefits of systems that deliver the precision, but use this accessible and widely used terminology seems self evident. Welcome to psychometrics the commodity!