

Psychometrics and People Decisions

If you open today's tabloid newspapers, chances are there will be several stories based on getting 'people decisions' badly wrong; '*paroled prisoner kills again*', '*betrayal by trusted royal aide*', '*attack by care in the community patient*'. These decisions will have involved numerous 'experts' with high levels of professional training and experience. Illustrations at a more personal level might include '*charmer dupes housebound pensioners*' or '*sex vicar deceives congregation ladies*', and what about all those divorces, broken relationships and shattered dreams? So how can things go so badly awry?

The problem is, as individuals, we are simply dreadful at making these decisions. In our attempts to sum one another up we readily get sidetracked and confused. Research confirms that our 'people perceptions' are woefully inaccurate. If we consider the kind of information on which our 'people decisions' can be based, it is clear that we are usually dealing with intuition and subjective feelings, and rarely with hard evidence.

Psychometric testing is a technology with more than 100 years history of progress and development. It helps with the innumerable people decisions that need to be made every day. Decisions about the needs of individual school children, about the most suitable employees, about careers, rehabilitation programmes, staff training, what to do with offenders or the management of the mentally ill. Most of these decisions are crucial to the individual involved, and also critical to the organisation concerned or to society as a whole.

But don't get too excited, even the best psychometric tests only provide an estimate of someone's characteristics. Nevertheless, these will be the most accurate and objective estimates available. Given our personal limitations in this area, they represent a major contribution to our people assessment skills.

It's important to appreciate that psychometric testing actually operates along lines that are familiar to most people. Forget the mumbo jumbo and set aside any preconceptions – psychometric assessment follows processes that you are likely to use intuitively yourself. Its unique contribution is that it does it with greater rigour, objectivity, consistency and reliability. For example:

- We might ask someone questions to find out about them
– as do *personality measures* but the questions are very carefully researched to confirm they are telling us what we want to know.
- We might set tasks to see what someone is capable of

– *psychometrics* do the same but the tasks have been carefully designed, finely incremented and their difficulty has been quantified.

- In our personal judgements, we make use of previous experience of people
– *psychometrics* also bases its ratings on previous experience, using validity research and by comparing individuals with data accumulated from a large sample of other people; the norm group.
- Intuitively we put people in categories e.g. very funny, quite funny, mildly amusing, really boring.
– where we would use quantitative language, *psychometric testing* uses numbers to express the relative strength of a trait or ability.

Psychometric processes are carefully standardised, in respect of the procedures candidates are put through, the way their performance is scored and the way that these scores are interpreted. The consistency of psychometrics and their numeric output means that test results can be researched in ways that intuition cannot – in other words they are transparent and accountable. Outcomes too are researched to confirm the extent to which assessment objectives have been met, and what inferences can justifiably be made from those test results.

Psychometrics in Business

Improving business performance through better ‘people decisions’ for selection, recruitment and development, are the key drivers of psychometric testing in the commercial world. Psychometrics offer the possibility of assessing a person’s underlying temperament – whether, for example, they are outgoing or shy, risk-taking or cautious, passionate or unemotional. Such characteristics explain the consistencies in a person’s behaviour and, ultimately, they determine their comfort zone and their suitability for particular kinds of employment. Assessments indicate to what extent an applicant’s natural temperament matches the ideal profile for the job, and to what extent they might need to moderate, control, develop or compensate for their natural temperament in order to succeed in that role.

The past meets the future

In psychometrics, as with many other business practices, technology is changing everything. The internet is the perfect vehicle for systems that deliver expert judgment with a consistency and accountability that could not otherwise be matched. The legacy of the past is evident in the restraints of paper publishing, the complexities and obscurities of test interpretation and the

elaborate safeguards attempting to ensure ethical practices. This is compounded by an explosion of internet based products, many of indifferent quality.

The ease of internet publishing has certainly created a potential minefield for the unwary. But, sticking with the past in this internet age gives the worst of all possible worlds. Practices, ethics and safeguards all have to be fundamentally reconsidered. There are great opportunities for the development of new online approaches that combine previously unimaginable accessibility of the internet with the rigour of psychometric technology. Availability, ease of use and freedom from jargon will characterise a new breed of high utility systems that are within the reach of anyone faced with those critical hiring decisions; even the smallest of businesses for whom staff selection is so crucial to survival. Beware though – in this rapidly changing territory, reviews, evidence of validity and the integrity and reputation of providers remain the essential guides to distinguishing the best from the rest.

Geoff Trickey is managing director of business psychology specialists, Psychological Consultancy Limited; www.psychological-consultancy.com