

Interview techniques: psychometrics

A look at the two basic types of psychometric tests.

Psychometrics is a loosely used word that has created a whole industry of occupational testing and employee assessment.

It covers a variety of tests to assess the character strengths and weaknesses of a candidate, providing accurate profiles of their suitability for a position.

What are psychometric tests?

Psychometric tests are often used by employers as part of their selection process. Basically, psychometric tests are tools for measuring the mind ('metric' = measure; 'psycho' = mind). There are two types of psychometric tests:

- Aptitude tests which assess your abilities
- Personality questionnaires which help build a profile of your characteristics and personality.

How are they used by employers?

Employers can use these tests at any point during the selection process. Sometimes they are used at the beginning, as a way of screening out unsuitable candidates. Other employers prefer to use them towards the end of a selection process.

But don't panic; psychometric tests are almost always used in conjunction with more traditional selection methods, such as a one-to-one interview. This means that, even if you don't do brilliantly with psychometric tests, you can still impress the selectors in other ways.

Why are they used?

Many employers believe that psychometric tests give an accurate prediction of whether you are able to do the job and whether your character is suited to the work.

Research shows that, statistically speaking, psychometric tests are one of the most reliable forms of revealing whether or not a candidate is suitable for a job.

How can I prepare for the tests?

Unlike GCSEs and 'A' levels, psychometric tests are not testing your knowledge or memory. They are testing your aptitude for various tasks or trying to reveal a more accurate assessment of your personality and temperament in the workplace.

However, it does pay to familiarise yourself with typical questions, particularly in aptitude tests. Quite often a mediocre score can be vastly improved with practise.

Aptitude Tests

Also known as cognitive, ability or intelligence tests, these do not examine your general knowledge but test your critical reasoning skills under strictly timed conditions.

There are many different types of tests depending on the type and level of job you're applying for. However, a typical test might have three different sections each testing a different ability e.g. verbal reasoning, numerical reasoning and diagrammatic or spatial reasoning. Typically, the test would allow 30 minutes for 30 or more questions.

Your score on these tests is compared to a 'norm group' which is usually made up of current jobholders who have done this test in the past.

Employers can set their own standard in terms of how well you have to do in comparison with the 'norm group' in order to 'pass'.

But as a general rule of thumb you should try to complete 70 to 80 per cent of the questions and aim to correctly answer at least two thirds of those which you have answered.

How can I improve my score?

The people who design aptitude tests argue that you either have certain abilities or not, and that spending hours practising will not significantly increase your score.

While this may be true to a certain extent, practise does improve your speed if nothing else and will also reduce your nervousness.

There is also a phenomenon known as the 'halo effect' which amounts to a small but significant improvement in your score after regular practise. This effect lasts for about two weeks. So, to improve your score try the following tips:

- Try and find some examples of these tests and practise.
- Employers will often send you some examples of these tests before the selection day. There are several books on the market with sample tests as well as a few websites (see below).
- Have a watch in front of you and work out at the start roughly how long you've got for each question. But bear in mind that in some tests questions get more difficult as you work through them.
- Strike a balance between speed and accuracy. Don't waste too much time on questions you find difficult. Conversely, don't give up on a question prematurely if in a few seconds you think you have solved it. The more obvious answers are often misleading.
- Avoid wild guessing. In some tests marks are deducted for incorrect answers. This is called 'negative marking'.
- For numerical reasoning, brush up on basic arithmetic as well as fractions, ratios and percentages. Get hold of a GCSE textbook and do a few of the questions.
- For verbal reasoning, try the very exciting activity of reading manuals, technical reports, or academic and business journals. Extracting the main points from passages of text and summarising their meaning will also help.

Personality Questionnaires

Even if you score well in aptitude tests, this doesn't necessarily mean that you will be suited to a job. You can be good at something, but hate doing it.

Success in a job also depends on your personal characteristics and qualities. Personality questionnaires can measure these. Questions focus on a variety of personality aspects such as:

- How you relate to other people
- Your work style
- Your ability to deal with emotions (your own and other people's)
- Your motivation, determination and general outlook
- Your ability to handle stressful situations

Unlike aptitude tests, there are no right and wrong answers, although occasionally there is a time limit. Selectors will not be looking for a particular type of 'profile' but certain characteristics which are suited to the job.

How should I answer the questions?

Many employers want candidates with a balance of personal qualities: for example, being able to get on with people, take charge and organise, and being focused on achievement.

But don't try and second guess the answers that they want. There are often checks within questionnaires to detect whether you are giving a false picture of yourself.

Corny as it sounds, it's probably best just to be yourself: ultimately neither you nor the employer will be happy if the real you is not on display at work.

Psychometrics online

There are many companies advertising psychometric testing on the internet. Most offer a comprehensive consultation for a fee, a few others give you the benefit of taking a simple test online, giving you a chance to experience, first hand, a psychometric test. Here are a few which we recommend.

Top Jobs test takers guide

Of all the psychometric services offered on the web, this is one of the most user-friendly and accessible of the test guides, with clear examples of abstract, verbal and diagrammatical tests.

www.topjobs.co.uk

Solutions

This is a downloadable test offered by the website psychometrics.co.uk. The cost of the test is £24.99.

www.psychometrics.co.uk

Psychometrics.com

This site offers a comprehensive overview of the various tests commonly used, and offers two basic tests for free: Career Values Inventory and Trima Career Competency Questionnaire.

www.psychometrics.com

Your mentor

This site is useful if you wish to get a clearer insight into your own personal development and self awareness. It charges £20 each for a comprehensive self awareness and work environment profile.

www.yourmentor.net